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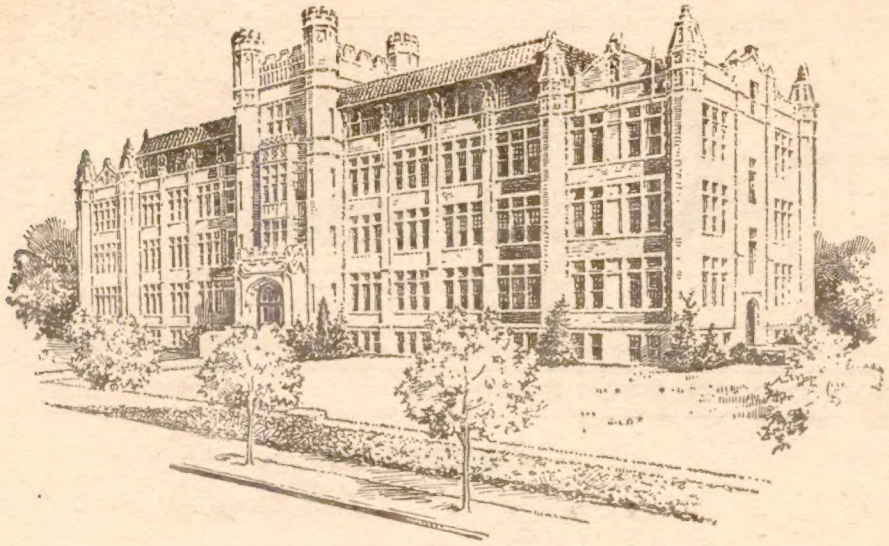

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"Stop clowning!"

. . . . HE WHISPERED

—but when I began to play

I HAD been trying—unsuccessfully—to make an impression on Helen for weeks. But she didn't seem to see me at all. Naturally, I was pretty downhearted at the turn affairs had taken. For, at the beginning of our acquaintance, she had certainly been far more friendly with me than now. Utterly perplexed, I turned to her brother for advice.

"Forget it," he laughed. "Helen isn't annoyed by anything you've done. It's something you *haven't* done. . . . Oh, I say, I'm sorry!" he broke off suddenly, red as a beet.

"What were you going to say?" I demanded. "What haven't I done?"

"It's nothing. Just a slip of the tongue," he evaded clumsily. But I insisted that he tell me and at last he consented.

"Well, you know, Helen has always been fond of music. I once heard her say she could never care for anyone who didn't know how to play some instrument or other. Of course, that's ridiculous. Lots of perfectly nice people—congenial, charming—have no musical ability. But you know how girls are. Once they get a notion, they stick to it, come what may!"

I almost broke out into three cheers at Jerry's explanation. But that would have spoiled my secret—the secret I had kept so well all these months. Instead, I said,

"I wish you had told me this before. For I can play a bit, you know—one-finger stuff."

He laughed. "Why not try it at the party to-night? It ought to show her your heart's in the right place, anyway!"

A Dramatic Surprise

That night I sat down at the piano and did a chop-stick version of "Yes, We Have No Bananas!" to everybody's intense delight.

Calls of "What technique!" "When are you going to give a Carnegie Hall recital?" came from all over the room. But suddenly Jerry was at my side.

"Stop clowning!" he whispered. "Helen thinks I put you up to this to make fun of her!"

Instead of jumping up and apologizing to Helen, as he expected me to, I calmly swung into the opening bars of that beautiful ballad, "Garden in the Rain."

At first, astonishment kept them silent, but before long the whole crowd was singing—even Helen.

It must have been an hour before they allowed me to leave the piano. During that time I had played everything they asked for—songs, dance music, classical selections, jazz. . . .

My Secret

"Why on earth didn't you tell me you knew how to play?" demanded Jerry as we went home. "Why have you been keeping it a secret? I distinctly remember you once said you couldn't play. Yet to-night . . ."

I looked at Helen. "There was a special reason for playing to-night," I said. "I couldn't have done it months ago. Even last year Jerry's remark about my not being able to play, wouldn't have been an exaggeration.

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"Not only about music," she murmured, with a shy smile.

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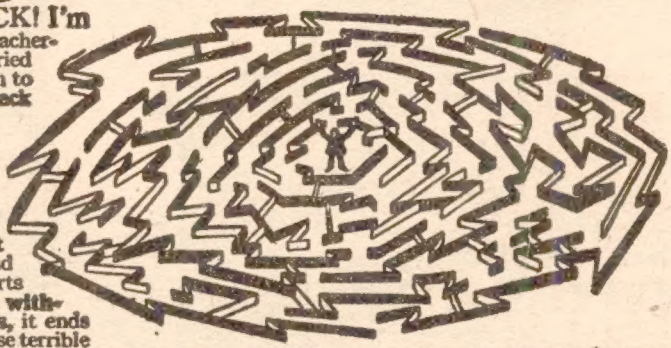

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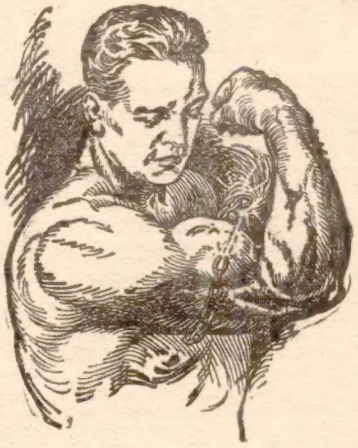

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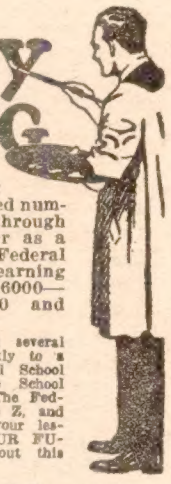

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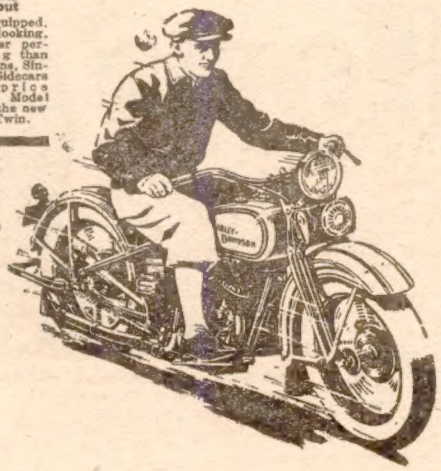

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By

Eleanor Elliott Carroll

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FOG

By JACK ASTON

CREEPING down the Narrows,
Where the fog hangs low;
Calling to each other,
Cautious freighters go.

This one's bound for Rio;
That one's bound for Rome—
Tramps that plod the ocean,
Calling no port home.

Grayish-white and clinging,
Shrouding stack and sail;
Fog makes steamers frightened—
Their sirens slowly wail.

Transatlantic greyhounds,
Lean and big and fine;
Creep past pug-nosed ferries
Churning through the brine.

Toil-worn scows and tugboats,
Puffing through the gloom;
Sound their haunting warnings,
Calling: "Give us room!"

Fog enwraps the Narrows,
Blanketing the bay;
Slow and mighty solemn,
The shipping moves to-day.

The Baron Flies

By Arthur J. Burks

The snow-covered barriers of China fling their challenge to this American ace at large, but the Baron knew no fear—and no retreat.

CHAPTER I.

DISCHARGED.

NO one knew exactly where he had received his title of "Baron," nor why he always carried a swagger stick; and few people ever asked him questions about either, if they knew or had even heard about Laube. Some said that the "Baron" had been tacked onto him in Germany, with the personal remarks of the kaiser in red ink on the edges.

The truth was that he had been born in Brooklyn, where there are few, if any, barons. He never visited Germany in his life, except when a lot of his fellow citizens had done so, during the occupation.

Just now, Baron Laube was the head of the Mukden Arsenal, the largest in the world. He had taken it over during the régime of the late Chang Tso-Lin.

The Baron weighed around a hundred and thirty-five pounds. His blue eyes were inscrutable. Not even a Chinese

could ever read his thoughts. His hair was sandy, and everybody saluted him because he was a general in the armies of northern China, commanded by the Young General. He returned salutes merely by waggling his hand whose thumb was invariably hooked in his trousers pocket. In summer he wore British shorts. Nobody had ever seen him wearing the Chinese uniform, and, though he was heart and soul in his work, he vowed that nobody ever would.

Nobody tried to force him to, either. The Chinese thought of him as—whatever the Chinese equivalent is for "hell on wheels." They called him the "Swagger-stick Baron," and the "Little Un," but never to his face. He insisted on Baron, and was so called.

Now things were popping for fair. The Young General, whom Laube felt sure had none of his dad's spunk, had, on a visit to Nanking, thrown in with the Nationalists—against whom his dad had died fighting. As a result a new general, known to Laube only by report, was to take command of the fifty-odd regiments of the armies of the Manchurian war lord.

The man had arrived and was in command. His name was Lung Hsi Shan, and Laube didn't like the name. He believed he would like the man even less.

A JAPANESE officer, of whom there were several serving with the Manchurian armies, entered Laube's office without knocking and bowed a bit mockingly.

"Haven't I told you," said Laube easily, talking around his disreputable corncob, "never to enter my office without knocking, or having some one find out if I want to see you!"

"But I have a message of importance," said the Japanese, still with that appearance of knowing a jest whose point was hidden from the Baron, "from General Lung Hsi Shan, now in command of the armies of Manchuria. He instructs you to proceed at once—to his residence—that formerly occupied by General Chang Tso-Lin."

"You will send back to General Lung Hsi Shan," said Laube softly, a glitter in those dead-blue eyes of his, "my compliments, and inform him that if he wishes to see me I'm always to be found at the arsenal."

The Japanese grinned.

"I am afraid, Little Un," he said, "that you'll have to take your message yourself, whether you like it or not!"

The officer raised his voice, and four other officers, all Chinese, stepped into the office, pistols in hand. Laube drew his slim legs under him, and the knuckles of his right hand grew white as he gripped his swagger stick. He would have liked very much to show these four just what an active man could do with a swagger stick, but decided against it. An appearance of meekness, in times past, had served him well.

Twenty minutes later, Laube stood slouchily before Lung Hsi Shan, who had kept him waiting for ten minutes in a room where there were no chairs.

"Laube!" snapped the Chinese. "The erstwhile commander of the arsenal!"

"Baron Laube, to the chinks!" retorted Laube. "And you look like all the rest of them!"

The face of Lung Hsi Shan darkened, and his eyes shot flames of fury. He almost choked, and Laube grinned as he watched him fight for self-control.

"I could have you shot for insolence!" said Lung Hsi Shan. "But it pleases me to have you publicly stripped of your command and your commission. You will proceed, under the guard of these four officers, to the arsenal, and will occupy your usual quarters for to-night. To-morrow you will leave China for good!"

"What's wrong? Services unsatisfactory? Not getting out the munitions fast enough? Any definite charge against me?"

"That I say you are to be relieved of your post is sufficient, Baron," replied Lung Hsi Shan. "I'm merely going to make a few changes for better in a large and important command that has been unbelievably inefficiently handled!"

Laube grinned, and his eyes roved away from the general to his four guards. Four officers—Lung Hsi Shan must regard him as important. That the general hadn't answered his questions troubled him not at all. The Young General in his absence, had been double-crossed—that was all. Laube had been expecting this very thing to happen. Some fanatical Chinese officers were beginning again the old plaint, "China for the Chinese," and all foreigners had to go. Laube knew where the fuss would start—on the Chinese Eastern Railway.

"You know anything about bears, Shan?" demanded Laube.

"General Shan!" roared the general. "And what do you mean about bears?"

"I was just thinking about a particular breed of bears, about one particular individual bear—in other words, the Russian bear."

"If you're laughing at me——" began the general.

Laube merely grinned and spoke to the four officers in rapid Mandarin.

"Come on, children. Father must be tucked into bed."

THE four had scarcely caught their breath, marveling that lightning had not struck Laube for the sacrilege of baiting a great Chinese general, when the five rickshas, with Laube unconcernedly riding in the first one, entered the gates of the Mukden Arsenal. Snappily the Chinese sentries smacked their rifles up to present arms as Laube entered. He returned the salutes by waggling the fingers on the hand the sentries could see, thumb tucked into his pocket.

The Japanese officer was in Laube's office when Laube entered, sitting in Laube's seat, with his feet on Laube's desk.

"You have my chair," said Laube quietly, as the Chinese officers came in behind him.

"Which I shall keep, since I'm to have temporary charge of the arsenal," retorted the Japanese captain. "I no longer take orders from the Little Un, you comprehend?"

"That's twice you've called me that nickname," said Laube, grinning. "I'm surprised you don't know better, considering the months you have served with me, learning my job, so that you could relieve me. My chair, please!"

"My chair, please!" retorted the officer, insolently. "I keep it!"

Laube shrugged his shoulders, turned and looked casually at the four officers, who were watching this byplay with much interest. They'd heard about the Little Un, and they had thought him a tough fellow indeed. Yet here he was being browbeaten by one of the very officers he had, until this afternoon, commanded.

They were openly grinning at Laube's apparent discomfiture.

Then gasps of amazement burst from their lips, as the Little Un went into action.

Quick as a flash, he stepped toward the Japanese officer, and his swagger stick, three feet in length, slashed at the Japanese like a sword. It wasn't a sword, and one could scarcely stab a man with it. But in the hands of Laube it was a terrible weapon. With it he had no need at close quarters for rifle or sword.

The tip of the swagger stick seemed to slide whole inches into the midriff of the Japanese officer. With a gasp, his face going white as ashes as the wind went out of him like an explosion, the Japanese doubled up, hands over his stomach. The stick, withdrawn as quick as light, shot forward once more. This

time its tip struck the Japanese on the chest, straightening him up. His hand leaped to his side where his holster hung. He had the weapon out, and its muzzle was almost in line with Laube when that terrible stick got into play again.

The pistol was flung across the room, and the Japanese shrieked with the pain of a snapped wrist. But his shriek broke off as Laube's stick again went into play. This time its tip seemed barely to touch the Japanese on the forehead. The brown man fell to the floor, overturned the chair and kicked the desk two feet out of position.

Laube stooped, righted the chair and turned to stare into the blank faces of his four guards. Surprise and consternation were written on those four faces, and four hands hung close to four holsters. But the smile of the Little Un was disarming.

HE raised his voice and shouted around the stem of that disreputable pipe. An orderly entered.

"Has any one here heard of a change in the command?"

"No, sir," replied the orderly.

"Then see that my single-seater is run out at once. In ten minutes I am taking off for—well, somewhere outside of China, maybe."

As the orderly turned away after the salute, Laube, apparently having forgotten his four guards, followed the orderly to the door, stepping over the body of the unconscious Japanese as he did so.

"Be sure there is plenty of gas, and have a few extra tins stowed on the wings near the fuselage."

"But, Baron," suddenly interposed one of the guards, touching Laube on the shoulder, "the general's orders!"

Laube grinned and shifted his pipe to the other side of his mouth, without using his hands.

"Oh, yes," he replied, "the general's orders—I'd forgotten about them. And what the devil do you mean by putting your hands on me?"

The officer was looking at the swagger stick in Laube's right hand, as Laube's voice warned him that action might be momentarily expected. But while the stick did not move, Laube's left hand, ridiculously small, exploded against the man's jaw like a charge of nitroglycerin. The fellow dropped like a log.

A second later the next officer fell. On his skin was the imprint of a dime. Laube had struck him with the tip of his stick, and that tip was a dime.

"Three!" said Laube dispassionately, drawing easily on his dead pipe.

The next blow—for Laube never wasted a single one in a fight like this—struck the third officer behind the ear. He dropped to his knees, then to the floor, sighing like a man who is exhausted.

The fourth man, in the act of pulling the trigger of his pistol, was so badly frightened that he shot through the window. But he didn't know about it until many minutes later. He, too, went down, and a welt was forming on his forehead.

LAUBE sighed and took his seat behind the desk, painstakingly cramming his corncob pipe with tobacco. He looked down at the handiwork of his swagger stick.

"Four!" he stated. "And five! I wonder how many more there'll be before the end of the chapter!"

He began to smoke placidly, hitting his heavy brogans with that deadly little swagger stick. The Japanese officer was regaining consciousness. His eyes opened. He finally sat up. His face was a mask of terror as he looked at Laube. He was close enough to him for that swagger stick to come into use again.

Then he looked at the four guards.

"Baron," he choked, "I'm very sorry, but—but, Baron, the general will have

you shot for this! You've killed four of his officers!"

"No, I haven't! I've merely demonstrated my right to a seat that belongs to me until to-morrow morning."

"But what will you do? Where will you go?"

"Nothing that'll interest you. Away." It pleased Laube to answer questions painstakingly in the order they were asked.

"But——" objected the officer, starting to rise.

"Stay down," snapped Laube, his swagger stick suddenly freezing at point, "and after I'm gone, take a look at your forehead in the mirror, and if your eyes are good, you'll find a motto that, being good enough for my country, is good enough for me."

"And that?"

"'In God we trust!' If you try to stop me from going, there'll be another motto right beside the first one, exactly like it—but more heavily embossed, if you understand me!"

Five minutes later, Baron Laube was heading straight into the wastes beyond Ta Ling, toward the hills which angle away inland through Manchuria from Shanhaikwan, where ends the Great Wall of China.

As Laube flew, his blue eyes stared unblinkingly ahead. Those eyes mirrored a brain which could vision a strange trail etched in crimson, leading away into the future.

CHAPTER II.

THE OUTCASTS.

LAUBE knew exactly where he was going. As far as he knew there was no one in Mukden who knew that place. The Young General knew it, but, though the young chap was soft in some ways, Laube believed in him. Experience, Laube felt, might make a man of the Young General. Wherever he went, as long as he held his commission—which Lung Hsi Shan had wholly failed to have stripped from him—he would serve the Young General as faithfully as he had in the past.

Half an hour out of Mukden he looked back and grinned. He looked at his guns but shook his head. Those flyers who were after him were merely obeying orders—they could not help themselves. Even at this distance he could tell who they were by the way they flew—wasn't decent flying sense in the lot of them!

Laube was perhaps the best flyer in China. He had flying sense to a marvelous degree. He could start for a given place on the darkest night, doze over his stick until he was within ten minutes of his destination and then go down literally feeling his way to a safe landing.

Something soft and wet touched his cheeks. He grinned. He hadn't really hoped for such luck. It was snowing, and, looking back, he could scarcely see the four flyers who were coming to bring him back to the vengeance of Lung Hsi Shan.

One of them, one Captain Kung, was a tenacious sort of cuss—might even have to manhandle that baby. As a subordinate of Laube, that habit of tenacity had been great stuff. As his pursuer it wasn't so good, but the little Baron never crossed bridges before he reached them.

IN his mind he thought of the spot where he intended to land—and stay if it were possible. As he flew he began to plan out in his mind what he would do.

Those four ships were getting closer. One of them fired a few rounds from his guns, but Laube wasn't worried. Unless by accident, he wouldn't be struck at this range.

Thinking of his landing place—which was one of the few secrets China had kept—Laube knew that those four must

never know of that spot, even if he had to take drastic steps to prevent it.

The snow was now a smother of white, and Laube hunched his thin frame deeper into the heavy clothing he had worn for this fateful hop.

Bullets were smashing all about him, but he didn't even look back. However, he started to swing to the left, toward Shanhaikwan, knowing that if he did it gradually, the four behind him would scarcely be able to note the progressive change of direction.

When he was finally flying at right angles to his former course, he started veering to the left a bit farther. He flew in this great curve for half an hour, while the four behind him got no closer, though they sent a few more angry bursts in his direction.

Then, all at once, he cut squarely to the right and let his ship full out. Savagely the motor bellowed and the four behind him seemed to travel backward at top speed.

"And they'd swear, one and all of 'em," he said to himself, "that I'm now flying straight toward the Sungari, or Vladivostok, or some other jumping-off place in Siberia. All their flying sense is in their hands and feet."

AN hour longer he flew, sometimes dozing over the stick. There were no landmarks, but Laube needed none. He knew when he reached the mountains, and he smiled to himself with satisfaction. A slight swerve to the right, and fifteen more minutes would bring him to his goal.

He was positive he had lost Kung and his crowd. Even if he hadn't, they had lost all sense of place and direction, which was really what he wanted.

Fifteen minutes later, he started dropping, jazzing his motor, knowing that mountain peaks were now above him. He sought through the swirl of white for lights below.

Finally he saw it, a yellow blur against the ground. He jazzed his motor again —and the lights went out.

"Poor devils," he muttered, "afraid to call their souls their own. I'm glad of this chance to give 'em back some of their courage and their self-respect, if they haven't slipped too far."

He couldn't see the ground. He knew that in one place there was a precipice over which a man and plane might easily plunge to destruction. He didn't mind —he knew where it was as well as if he could see it. Down and down he went, feeling for the ground with his trucks.

Wheels and tail skid struck together, and Laube had successfully made another blind landing. Fur-clothed figures, huge and black through the snow, materialized like monsters out of the white wilderness. Mittened hands caught at his wings.

"Good evening!" he said, as he cut his motor.

The furred figures made no answer. A feeling that all was not well came to Laube. He had never landed here before, but he had flown over many times and had talked with some of these exiles. They behaved strangely.

"Good evening!" he said in Russian this time.

Quickly the answer came in Russian.

"So you are one of the traitors who would give us into the hands of our most deadly enemies? Baron Laube, whom we have always regarded as our greatest benefactor! Climb out and walk as you are told. At the first wrong move, you will be shot without mercy!"

Laube did as he was bidden. He walked straight ahead, after hearing some one give orders to house his plane. A door opened for a second, disclosing a great, rough-hewn room. He entered, prodded forward by the muzzle of a pistol. There must have been a hundred people in that room about a table, loaded with rich food such as only Russians would have prepared. There were beautiful women, their faces white, and

men whose faces were stern—and every face seemed to be that of a deadly enemy.

"I have not betrayed you!" he said.

There was not even a stir in answer. Then every one stiffened as, from high above, sounded the roaring of a motor—an airplane coming down for a landing.

"If you have not betrayed us, why have you brought the planes of Lung Hsi Shan, who would give us all up to be executed?"

Laube stiffened. There was no use explaining to these people. It did look bad, all right. Under his breath he cursed the tenacity of Captain Kung, which so many times in the past he had praised.

The door opened and closed again, while everybody waited.

It opened. Laube turned. Captain Kung, pistol in hand, stood with his back against that door, staring at Laube.

A moan went up from one of the women. A man quieted her.

"Where are the other planes?" snapped Laube, then could have bitten his tongue off. For many of these people knew Mandarin—the tongue he spoke to Kung—and his words would seem to prove their indictment of him.

"I lost them," said Kung. He looked about him, grinning at the faces of the Russians. There seemed now no anger in those faces—only a deep, ghastly hopelessness.

Laube's right hand raised. Something that looked like a streak of light flashed from it. Kung's pistol barked. Laube whirled halfway around and crashed to the floor like a man shot through the heart.

CHAPTER III.

WHITE RUSSIANS.

A WOMAN screamed. Laube's swagger stick had struck Kung between the eyes, tip first. His eyes were glazed and his knees trembled, threatening to drop him to the floor. He tried to raise his weapon again, but the blow he had received seemed to have rendered his whole body nerveless.

Laube had fallen flat on his face, but even as he struck he was gathering his knees under him. There was a splash of red on his forehead, and his cheeks were twin rivulets of crimson. Only his eyes did not change.

Kung's pistol dropped from his fingers, which clenched themselves into a bludgeon of a fist. Kung had always liked Laube and had gone with him into many adventures. Nevertheless many times he believed the little man had been much overrated. Now he was a little ashamed that he had drawn a pistol on such a small man, in the presence of a great number of people.

Laube was getting to his feet when Kung charged, his great arms bent at the elbow and held wide from his sides, as though he would catch the smaller man between them and grind him to a pulp. Laube was reeling. His hand went up to flirt the blood out of his eyes.

With quick murmurs of apology for their doubt, the Russian exiles cried out to him to get away. Two men, wearing the high *kubankas* which the temperature made necessary, sprang at Kung.

Laube barked at them in Russian, even as Kung's long arms wrapped themselves around him:

"Keep out of this! If I require help, I'll ask for it!"

His cap was gone, and his tow hair looked like that of an old man. It was nearly white. He looked like a little, old man fighting a huge gorilla, and there wasn't a man in the place who would have given him a fifty-to-one chance against the huge Chinese officer.

Kung swung Laube high in his arms and hurled him from him, as though Laube had been a babe in arms. Laube flew through the air, apparently doomed to crash out his brains against the wall of the building.

A GASP burst from the lips of the watchers as Laube turned in mid-air like a cat, and landed squarely on his feet. He was not even breathing heavily, and there was a slight smile on his face. He paused for a second, as though surprised to note that he had been hurled completely over the long table at which most of the White Russians were seated.

He grinned at Kung and spoke softly in Mandarin:

"You should have kept your gun, Kung! It would have given you a chance you no longer possess!"

A great burst of rollicking laughter rumbled from the throat of the Chinese, but it ended in a gasp of amazement. For Laube had put his right hand on a woman's shoulder, his left on the arm of her partner and vaulted squarely onto the table, his legs astride a bottle of vodka.

From this point of vantage he hurled himself directly at Kung. The big man held up his arms to catch Laube as he landed. Laube's hands, however, struck Kung's shoulders, and Laube swung quickly to the right. He landed squarely on his feet, facing Kung, who still stared stupidly toward the table whence Laube had leaped upon him.

"This way, Kung, and take your medicine!"

Laube's left hand caught the shoulder of the Chinese and swung him around. While Kung was still slightly off balance, Laube's right fist cracked against Kung's jaw—cracked with a sound audible through all the great room. Kung staggered.

A roar of approval went up from the men at the table. They banged their vodka tankards on the rough, wooden table. Kung went berserk. He dived at Laube's legs, trying to grasp him about the knees. Laube leaped lightly into the air, and Kung slid directly under him, measuring his length on the floor.

Straight ahead of Kung was the pistol he had dropped. Laube could have reached it ahead of him, but he chose, instead, to sweep across the room and catch up his swagger stick.

Kung swung to a sitting position, holding his pistol in both hands, which shook like those of a man with the palsy.

"Look out, Kung!" called Laube softly. "You might kill some of these people with that gun!"

FOR a second the big man hesitated, and Laube's swagger stick descended squarely upon his wrist, disarming him once more. Then Laube stepped back. Kung stared for a moment at the swagger stick, and memory flooded back upon him, for he knew of what that slender piece of wood was capable, in the hands of Laube.

Laube, however, was tired of being a showman to these White Russians. Already he had decided what to do with Kung.

Kung hurled himself forward. Laube stood, right foot advanced, his swagger stick hanging down his right side. At exactly the right moment he raised it, and Kung ran squarely into it. His head snapped back as though he had been shot. His legs ran straight ahead, out from beneath his body, which crashed supine to the floor. So heavy was the Chinese that the room seemed to shake on its foundations.

Laube stood for a moment. The Russians rose to their feet and raised their tankards. They were preparing to give him a toast.

"Please, my friends," he said, "you were right about me. I gave away your hiding place, without in the least intending to do so. This officer somehow managed to follow me here, probably by keeping in sight of my exhaust flames. But, save that we are in the mountains, I am sure he does not know the exact location. Whatever you have seen here, this man is a good officer and is really a

friend of mine, though just now it would be difficult to persuade him of that! He must be returned to his people. Who is in authority here?"

For a moment no one answered. Then a tall, slender, young man, dressed in garments which must many times have been seen at the court of the czar, stepped up to Laube.

"I am," he began, with a deep bow, his hand almost sweeping the floor, "Feodor Popov, and, though no one is really in authority here, I am at least a competent spokesman."

"Your title, sir?"

Popov flushed, the deep red running down into his gold-braided collar, and for a moment he seemed to have difficulty in breathing.

"I mean," said Laube quickly, "the title which you lost when you left Russia to come into exile?"

"My title was—and is——" replied Popov, "Prince Nicholas Feodor Popov!"

"To which, if right were right," said Laube, "you still would be entitled in your own country. I have many things to say to you, but first some disposition must be made of Captain Kung. His plane remains here. I will be blamed for its disappearance by General Lung Hsi Shan, but we will surely need it in our business. Please give necessary instructions to three or four men whom you trust——"

Again Popov's face reddened, this time with anger.

"There is no one in Nevsky whom I do not trust! We are all together here, and——"

Laube quickly raised his swagger stick, and Popov hesitated.

"I am a blunderer," stated Laube, his eyes roving over the assemblage. "It should certainly not have been necessary for Prince Popov thus to rebuke me, and I most richly deserved it. My humblest apologies! But to continue. Have these men take Kung, blindfolded, in whatever conveyance you can find, and get him as far as possible on the road to Mukden. It is snowing, and the snow will hide your tracks. Leave him bound and gagged, where he will not freeze, and start back here before sunrise. I cannot find it in my heart to injure a man who has been as loyal to me as this man has. Will you see to it?"

POPOV spoke swiftly. Three men stepped forward instantly. Kung was lifted from the floor, and a bandage immediately put over his eyes. He recovered consciousness while this was being done, but, at a sharp word from Laube, he made no outcry and did not resist.

"Will you keep your hands away from the bandage if I leave them free so that you can eat something before you start your return?" Laube demanded of Kung.

Kung nodded stiffly, though Laube knew that Kung would have given much to see the faces of the men at the table. For Kung must have certainly guessed that Laube had business with the Russians, and any business of Laube's would be of extreme interest to Lung Hsi Shan, whom Kung perforce served. But Kung had passed his word, and he kept it. He ate from the table, as invisible hands filled his plate.

Now and again Laube spoke to him, hurrying his repast.

Then Kung was led away, and the door closed behind him. When it opened the roaring of a high wind came in, savage and terrible, and Laube knew that in such a wind no plane could fly in safety. He was safe from further attacks for the night—from the minions of Lung Hsi Shan.

Quickly Laube's eyes roved over the people at the table. There were perhaps a hundred of them, men and women. But Laube knew that here, in this village of exiles, there were many more dwellings like this one, and that

Nevsky had a population of a thousand or more men, and almost as many women.

They all were watching the little man, waiting for him to speak—men and women of fair skin, fragile hands, luminous eyes over which hovered clouds of haunting sadness. Laube could understand those shadows. White Russians were everywhere in China. Men walked the streets barefooted—proud men who, not so long ago, had been "prince" or "count" or "grand duke." He did not have to hear their individual stories to know them, and he closed his mind against the thought of what many of the women could have told if horror of remembrance had not held them mute.

"What would it mean to Nevsky," said Laube at last, his eyes boring into the group at the table, "if Russia were to send a punitive expedition across the Manchuria-Siberia border?"

A gasp of consternation burst from the lips of the men. The women said nothing; but their eyes became pools of terror, and their white faces grew whiter still.

Popov answered.

"It would," he said softly, measuring his words carefully, "be the end of Nevsky. Death for us all—quickly or slowly, depending upon——"

He could not finish.

"I have come to ask you to help me prevent such a catastrophe," said Laube softly, "and to show you how to do it!"

LAUBE moved to the table and placed his hands on the back of a chair.

"In a matter of days, under the policy of Lung Hsi Shan hell will break loose on the border. China believes that China should be reserved for the Chinese. I have become a refugee because I am an American. The same thing will happen to every other foreigner. He will be sent back to his own country. Where, then, would you people be sent, my friends?"

A gasp went around the circle. How well they knew! To be sent back to Russia would mean death to them all, for once they had served the czar—who had been hurled to oblivion and death. The names of every one of them were marked in red—for slaughter.

"The first mistake of Lung Hsi Shan," Laube continued, "will be to dismiss Russians from control of the Chinese Eastern Railway. Russia will fight. She will cross the border with arms in her hands—and if she finds former imperialists in the little village of exiles called Nevsky——"

"We understand, Baron," said Popov harshly. "Why paint a picture afresh, that we all see every waking hour of our lives and dream of when we sleep? We have suffered enough. Show us how to keep this refuge which, poor though it is, is yet a refuge."

"I am still an officer in the armies of the Young General," replied Laube. "I am working in the interests of the Young General—I'm working against the mistakes of Lung Hsi Shan. If the Young General knew, he could not command me to do what I intend doing—with your help! But when it is done—if I succeed—I will receive his thanks and the silent gratitude of all China."

FOR a long moment there was silence. Then Laube continued:

"If there is any man among you who can fly an airplane, I wish to meet him at once!"

"Many of us do, naturally," said Popov. "It will be a war in the air, then?"

"Yes, and for the moment we will be outlaws, and whoever finds us may slay us!"

Popov smiled and turned to look from face to face. The women were white and silent, their ears drinking in every word, their eyes missing no move. Many eyes turned to Laube, but he met none of them. He believed there was no

place in the life of a soldier for women. Some day, and that soon, he was to know better.

"Gentlemen!" rang loud the sudden shout of Popov. "What do you say? Do we form a legion of the condemned to serve with this man, this American, Laube?"

The storm broke. They shouted until the room seemed to quiver. They pounded the table with their tankards, calling the names of Laube, of Popov, of Markov, and others which Laube did not know. Here and there a tear streaked down a feminine cheek, as some woman looked into a crimson-dyed future.

Laube raised his hand for silence.

"Set the women to packing their household possessions," he said quickly, "and gather all the men together and tell them!"

Here a woman spoke up for the first time, standing stiffly across the table from Laube. Her lips were red as ripe cherries, and her cheeks like cameo.

"We are all equal here," said the woman in a low voice, "and what the men do, we do. What they say, we vote on with them. What they do, we all do!"

Laube bowed.

"So be it, your ladyship," he murmured. He had caught her name as Olga Karnief, and she had been a princess. Beyond making a mental note that she still looked the part, Laube reserved opinion, as he did with all women.

Half an hour later, with Laube in the background, smoking his corncob pipe the entire colony of exiles stood in a great circle about a roaring fire in the center of Nevsky.

The exiles were singing sullen old folk songs, with an undercurrent of crushing sadness which expresses the heart of old Russia. Their white faces were turned toward the blizzardy sky; snow fell and melted on their cheeks. Now and again a subtle wave seemed to pass through them, so that they all swayed in unison as they sang.

At last the fire burned down, and the night was quiet. In the great room he had first entered, Laube sat beside the table, tersely outlining his plans to half a dozen of the leaders of the village of Nevsky.

"It is the wildest thing I ever heard of," Popov whispered.

"It is unbelievable," replied Laube softly, "which is exactly why it may succeed—why it must succeed. Well, what do you say? We have two planes. They can conceivably carry two extra men each, if they won't freeze bundled up on the lower wings against the fuselage. Draw cards to see what four men ride there. Popov pilots the plane Kung left behind, I pilot my own—for an unexpected call on Lung Hsi Shan."

"If we are caught——" spoke one of the men softly.

Laube shrugged.

"A firing squad in the morning!" he snapped.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CLAWS OF SHAN.

AT ten o'clock next night, two planes took off from the village of Nevsky. Laube flew one, Popov the other. Because of their exposed positions, the two extra men on the lower wings of each ship were swaddled in furs, until they seemed thrice their usual size.

Both ships staggered off an icy runway and bored into the night, their props whining, their motors screaming a wild pæan of defiance at the cold, black sky.

The watches of them all were synchronized to the second. The four who rode the wings could fly planes themselves. Laube had instructed them in every detail, even telling them the number of strides between certain points in the arsenal parade ground. There seemed no possibility of a hitch if the men came through, but the merest slip

would spell disaster—and the six men would die.

To himself Laube had assigned the most difficult task, though any one of the other five stood excellent chances of being riddled by bullets if they betrayed themselves by so much as a sound.

The planes climbed to a freezing elevation—twelve thousand feet above the mountaintops—and flew away toward Mukden.

Laube had noted the direction of the wind. If it did not veer, he would come in with the wind in his face, and nobody in Mukden would hear him. Even if his motors were detected, none would think the sounds important. Many planes now flew the skies of China.

WING and wing, the two planes hurtled toward Mukden. Popov was guided by Laube, for Laube could not be lost in the air. His flying sense would spell success or disaster for this mad mission. But he was unafraid. His cold corncob was tightly gripped between his firm, white teeth, and his narrowed eyes peered toward Mukden, while his thoughts raced fantastically ahead.

Lung Hsi Shan had assuredly sent word to the armies of the North that whoever killed Baron Laube would be rewarded. That worked in with Laube's plans.

Now and again Popov looked across at Laube. He had his orders—so had the others. If the others failed, Popov and Laube might get back, though it was doubtful. Laube intended to return with a squadron of six planes, or lose their lives in the attempt.

Twelve thousand feet above Mukden, Laube raised his right hand high and beckoned to Popov. Popov raised his own hand to show that he understood.

The guns were cut, and the two planes started spiraling down. As their struts and wires began to sing and whine in the wind of their dive, they leveled off until the singing and the whining stopped. Grimly they held to their courses, while the eyes of them both studied the black area which indicated the arsenal, where lights were out and soldiers asleep. They watched for moving lanterns which might indicate discovery.

But no slightest hint guided them as they dropped lower and lower. Laube intended to land on the arsenal's proving grounds, a dangerous place—but it was open and no sentries were used there. The barking of a single motor would rouse the entire arsenal force, and there were several regiments in garrison there.

LAUBE and Popov landed side by side and stepped from their planes. To the south they could make out the main buildings of the arsenal. Not a thing moved. There was no light—only occasional sounds, as sentries called to one another near the important buildings.

"Are you ready, Popov?" whispered Laube, talking around the stem of his pipe and flicking his leg lightly with his swagger stick.

"Yes," replied Popov. His voice was calm and even.

They hurriedly unfastened the four men bound to the under wings of their ships. Despite their wrappings, the four were almost frozen and had to be walked about before they were capable of moving alone.

They compared watches for a second. The four men breathed deeply; but there was no fear in their faces, as they strode toward the arsenal.

Laube spoke again to Popov.

"When you hear either the roaring of motors or the firing of rifles, take off—and take off fast. If you hear only rifles, take off and make for the mountains, as these four will then be beyond help. If they get away, fall in behind

them. You and I will cover their retreat with the planes."

To Laube the plan seemed simple. He knew where every plane was stored, how much gas each would have aboard, and where extra gas could be found.

The rest depended upon them. Their lives were in their own hands. As for Laube, he had an appointment with Lung Hsi Shan.

At exactly the appointed time, he entered the compound by a way he had used when the Young General had lived in this place, known only to certain officials. He moved toward a lighted window. There were several figures moving inside, and, as he looked in, he saw faces unfamiliar to him. Lung Hsi Shan, it seemed, had replaced the Young General's staff with officers of his own. Laube drew his breath in sharply, as he realized what this meant. Lung Hsi Shan was renovating from the ground up. That meant that even his flyers would be men whom Laube did not know.

That satisfied Laube's scruples against firing at any flyers who might attack him. He smiled with grim satisfaction.

Then he heard the excited voice of Lung Hsi Shan:

"The Russians on the Chinese Eastern must go. All foreigners, of whatever nationality, will be instructed to leave the country. What is it to us if the so-called White Russians will be executed upon reaching their own country? That is no affair of ours."

LAUBE'S eyes narrowed ominously. It was as he had thought.

"There's no telling what Laube may do," went on Lung Hsi Shan savagely. "He may throw in with the Russians against us! There should be some way of preventing that, and Laube must be stopped—brought back here dead or alive, or proof furnished that he is dead!"

"He is a dangerous man, excellency," said another officer, blandly. "Do you not think he might have been handled a bit more diplomatically!"

"Who are you to question my motives in handling the pigs of foreigners!"

"I am an officer of China," said the man quietly. "And I warn you that you are deliberately inviting war. You have ousted the Russian employees of the Chinese Eastern Railway a concession that is a matter of treaty. Russia will take drastic action about it!"

"Let her do so! We are ready. There are fifty-two regiments of soldiers in Manchuria alone!"

"And most of them are loyal to the Young General! There will be grumbling in plenty if they are forced into war against Russia."

"Grumblers will be shot or decapitated!"

Laube raised his head. There came the sudden roar of several airplanes, revving up in unison. He knew that the props had just been spun—that four men were racing to their cockpits. He counted the seconds, visualizing as he did so the outlines of the arsenal grounds and the landing field. Now the four pilots, with their motors still cold, were taxiing out onto the field, not yet daring to take off.

For several minutes they would taxi madly around the field, targets for hails of bullets, while their motors warmed up.

Laube's teeth glistened on the stem of his pipe as a new sound broke through the roaring of motors—the rattling crash of guns. That ability of the soldiers to leap swiftly into action had been part of Laube's own military preparations at the arsenal. Now it was turned against his own men.

But it couldn't be helped.

Laube knew that under cover of the savage uproar at the arsenal, Prince Popov would spin his prop and take off. He studied the sky for a moment or

two. Yes, there were the wings of a plane against the night, the exhaust fires trailing behind like the twin tails of a comet.

At the field four planes, props whirling wildly, were taxiing over the great open space. Flashes of flame from all directions lanced toward the ships. It was as though the soldiers at the arsenal had been expecting this looting expedition.

But Laube was listening for another sound. It came—the strident ring of Lung Hsi Shan's telephone.

The call was for the general. Laube watched him through the glass, keeping an eye out as he did so for prowling sentries.

Lung Hsi Shan listened for a minute, while his face grew black as a thundercloud. Then he whirled on his officers.

"Somehow or other," he cried, "that renegade, Laube, has managed to get four planes out of the hangars, and he will be taking them off in a minute or two, as soon as their motors are warm enough. That call was from Captain Usami, and he wants to know what to do. Those four planes must be stopped, and you will issue orders at once to the new flyers I have assigned to the planes——"

IT was for this that Laube had waited.

Flicking his swagger stick against his leg, Laube went to the door of Shan's quarters, opened it quickly and stepped inside. Every officer there whirled as he entered. None of them were armed, for it was bedtime and the place was guarded by double sentries.

"Good evening, Shan!" said Laube softly. "Did I hear you say that I was stealing your precious planes? Absurd! How could I be stealing your ships, when I have the perfect alibi of being in your presence while they are being stolen?"

"Laube!" bellowed Lung Hsi Shan.

"Baron Laube, to chinks! The first man who makes a move toward me, or raises his voice to call for a guard—will get the surprise of his life!"

It was a tribute to the reputation of Laube that every officer froze in his place and listened. If one man moved, they all would move; Laube would be easily and swiftly overcome. But who would move first? Laube grinned as he studied the faces of the officers and saw them look at one another, mutely asking that question.

"Shoot him!" choked Lung Hsi Shan. "Seize him! Tear him to pieces!"

"You remember what I said about bears, Shan?" asked Laube, his ears cocked for a certain sound. "Isn't it true that you have already heard the growling of the Russian bear?"

Shan seemed likely to choke with his own wrath. His eyes blazed at his officers but not one of them stirred. Shan raised his head. Laube knew that in a second his shout would go out to the sentries.

"Open your mouth," snapped Laube savagely, "and I'll shove this stick down your throat to your short ribs!"

Laube was fighting for seconds of precious time—delaying Shan's inevitable orders which would put his Cantonese flyers on the tails of the fugitive Russians.

A plane suddenly roared over Lung Hsi Shan's own compound. It was Popov's signal that the planes had taken off and were racing for the rendezvous.

Laube moved nonchalantly toward Shan, staring at him as though he would tear him apart if he moved. Then he swerved with lightning swiftness. He reached the window and struck twice with his swagger stick. There was a crash of glass, and Laube was gone.

Behind him rose the rasping bellow of Shan.

"Get that man! Fill him full of lead! Lose him and you lose your heads in the morning!"

Bullets rained about the head of

Laube as he raced for the secret way out of the compound. But he got through, unscathed, though the sentries outside spotted him and knelt to fire at his racing figure.

Laube ran like a hare. He was leaving the palace behind, but he knew that the dragnet was already out for him. There was every possibility that his plane would be discovered before he could reach it. He could be hunted down and shot like a dog.

He clutched his stick tighter in his hand and let out another burst of speed.

As he raced for his plane, half a hundred soldiers were running to cut him off, firing as they came. He must spin his prop, climb in and take off. One bullet would settle him.

To his amazement his prop was ticking over. Popov had decided that it wouldn't be heard in such a bedlam, and apparently it hadn't been. Laube clambered in and took off right in the faces of the charging soldiers, who knelt as he passed over their heads and hurled their lead at this catapulting plane that sprang straight into the sky. His plane soared higher and higher.

Laube leveled at nine hundred. Four planes were taking off from the field right under him. Far ahead he saw four planes dead-heading for the mountains, and in that instant he knew two things.

One of his flyers had failed. These four now taking off had to be downed.

Laube's hands went to the trips of his guns.

WELL out of Mukden, too far from their field to make a quick landing, Laube turned savagely on the four enemy flyers and tripped his guns to make sure that they were in working order.

They spread out in the form of a quarter circle as they saw Laube's intention. One or two, he understood, were to meet his attack; the others were to continue pursuit of the stolen planes or to get Laube himself in a deadly cross fire. Laube grinned coldly.

The first Chinese plane opened with a savage *rat-tat-tat-tat.* To Laube's amazement the gunner did not swerve at all but came at him head-on, apparently unafraid.

"They've been trained well, these Nationalist officers," he thought.

Then Laube started a series of dives and zooms in the face of his enemies—to save his prop from bullets and to bother the aim of the flyer immediately facing him.

His guns were chattering savagely, and the enemy was yawing right and left to throw off his aim. But Laube clung tenaciously, even though two ships which had swung wide were now angling in—one on his left, the other on his right—to rake his wings and fuselage with bullets.

The man on whom Laube was concentrating had plainly been expecting Laube to make some attempt against the two planes which were laying down the cross fire. The man banked swiftly, not noting that one of his friends was over to his right, angling in. Quickly Laube stood on his left wing tip, and his guns were never silent. He had noted that a collision was imminent, but he did not wish these flyers to die by accident. That would in no way add to the reputation and prowess of Laube. He must use some other method.

He knew that his bullets were stitching patterns of lead through the bottom of the cockpit of that one plane. He moved the nose of his plane as though it had been the nozzle of a hose. Fully a score of bullets must have gone through the pilot's body.

As the plane started to fall away, Laube deliberately covered that portion of the plane where the motor was located and gave it a couple of savage, stuttering bursts. He saw black smoke creep from the motor to crawl up the surface of the elevated wings.

THEN a sheet of yellow flame bathed the plane, bringing out the other three around it. They were like moths coming in to get their wings singed. Laube grinned and watched the burning plane go hurtling down to the white ground below. His altimeter said six thousand feet. A long drop and a hard bump, but the flyer would never know the one nor feel the other.

The glare lighted up the planes of the other three. Laube could even make out the face in the nearest one—a brown face covered by huge goggles, below a padded helmet. The man's mouth was open as though he gasped in horror. He was looking at Laube, after watching the fiery plummet of his comrade's burning plane.

Laube gave him no time to gain control of nerves which must have gone a-jangling at the gruesome sight. His guns were clattering and yammering, and his bullets were whipping the air about the face of that second flyer. The man's face turned crimson but that might have been the dying reflection of the fire from the downward rushing flamer. It might have been blood.

Laube was grinning, as he switched the sights to send a burst into the motor of his enemy.

At the same time bullets snapped past his ears. The glass on his dash was demolished, and splinters of it, fine as steel wool, cut his face in a score of places. He could taste his own blood, salty on his lips. His face seemed afire.

He sideslipped quickly, then allowed his plane to fall earthward, tumbling over and over as though completely out of control.

His sideslip had brought him out of the sight of the two who had sat on his tail. As soon as he was sure of this, even as the other two started diving upon him, he leveled at top speed, gave his ship the gun, pointed her nose at the sky and climbed under the belly of that wabbling plane whose pilot's mouth had hung open with horror.

EVEN as the two above Laube started stitching patterns on his wings and fuselage, he sent two more swift bursts into the plane of his second enemy. Lazily, the plane seemed to turn over, right wing down. Then the weight of the engine pulled its nose toward the earth. Its motor screamed wildly. Laube knew that a dead man rode the controls. At full speed, screaming wildly, the prop a great roaring blur, the second plane streaked it for the earth below.

A sledge hammer seemed to strike Laube in the back. He felt a gush of blood to his lips. But his eyes still were clear, though his whole body felt numb. Wildly he sideslipped away again, and the two were after him like terriers after a mastiff.

Bullets rattled all about him. A strut appeared to be nibbled by mice. A flying wire snapped with a shrill whine and streamed out straight in the slip stream. Laube was going out, unless something——

And then another ship dropped like a dead weight from the skies, and bullets streaked across first one enemy cockpit and then the other. Laube noted that plane. It was Kung's, now flown by Prince Popov, who had come to the rescue like a sportsman.

This definitely made Popov and all his people outlaws in the eyes of Shan. Yet Popov had returned as though the fact—which he knew full well—bothered him not at all.

In a trice one other plane was going down—under control, however, though its prop was gone. It landed in the snow, then stood grotesquely on its nose. A man was hurled from the pit, but he instantly stood up, and Laube saw him shake his fist savagely at his enemies aloft. The fourth plane refused to face odds of two to one and leveled

for Mukden. Wearily, Laube signaled to let it go.

Wing and wing, he flew back toward Nevsky with Popov. Now and again he nodded over the stick his teeth tight clenched against the pain of his wounds. But he must go on, must get through—for the Young General to whom he owed his allegiance—for the White Russians whom he had made outlaws—for the sake of a man who was now a prisoner in the hands of Shan.

He scarcely remembered landing. There was a dim vision of a white-faced woman whom he remembered as Olga Karnief. She cut away Laube's clothing above his waist and bent over him with probes and bandages.

"Do all that's necessary," he said, "but plug all the holes against bleeding. I've got to be over Mukden again at sunrise!"

She pursed her lips, studied him for a moment and nodded. Laube grinned and fainted dead away.

CHAPTER V.

THE FIRING SQUAD.

IN the bitter cold of a Manchurian dawn a barefooted man was escorted across the frozen parade ground at the arsenal toward a stone wall. The man's head was held erect, but his face was a mass of blood, and his feet were crimson horrors. They must have caused him untold agony, but he had suffered so much that nothing more could hurt him. His eyes were all but closed, and he stumbled as he walked with his armed guard.

Blood had frozen on his lips, and his clothing was harshly rasping—it, too, was dyed with blood which had frozen. Horror sat on the man's face like a mask. He was Karl Borotoff, who had failed to get away. There was a bullet somewhere inside him, but it hadn't killed him.

Tears ran down his cheeks, despite the proud erectness of his head—for Karl Borotoff had betrayed the exiles of Nevsky into the hands of Lung Hsi Shan. He cursed himself bitterly, for there was no atonement sufficiently great that he could make. His life would be sped within a few minutes now, but that would not be enough. In the eye of his tortured mind, he could see his friends and comrades and the gentlewomen of Nevsky lying stark and cold and crimsoned in the surrounding snows. Karl Borotoff was a traitor.

He was not the first man who had babbled secrets under the knives of Chinese tortures. Through the evolution of ages Chinese have become ghastly adepts in the art of loosening tongues. In an agony of sweat and blood, his body covered with crimson the knives had released, he had called out names and places.

Lung Hsi Shan himself had come to hear the tortured Russian give away his secrets. Laube and the exiles were given into his hands, and there were none to warn them. It was a grim jest—this judicious wielding of heated knives—hot stove lids on the soles of bare feet.

"Don't kill the fool!" Shan had commanded. "He must live until morning to face the firing squad!"

"Kill me now, for the love of God!" Borotoff had shrieked at Shan.

"You would not suffer enough," replied Shan with a cruel grimace, "and God means nothing to me!"

Borotoff could not even lose consciousness, though the agonies he suffered were beyond description. Even when he had babbled all the secrets he knew, they continued their torture, apparently believing that he still held something back.

But at last Borotoff had toppled forward in his bonds, and his naked body was allowed to remain there. The winds of Manchuria blew into the barnlike building, froze the blood upon him and

gored like the horns of bulls at his wounds.

JUST before sunrise they had roused him. Full memory flooded back upon the tortured man. Now the end was close, and he was glad. If only he could somehow warn his friends that he had betrayed them!

But he knew that was impossible. They placed him against the wall. Shan had not deigned to come to the execution. But already three planes had taken off—flying south to fool any spies for Laube that might be abroad—with the exact location of Nevsky in their minds. They would head into the mountains and reach Nevsky perhaps an hour after Borotoff had paid the final price for trying to steal planes from Lung Hsi Shan.

Borotoff was placed with his back against the wall. A grinning Chinese approached him with a black piece of silk. Borotoff tried to spit in the man's face, and his head lifted weakly with a touch of his old defiance.

"So," said the officer in charge of the firing squad, "you can die like a man now! Last night, when the knives were biting, your heart turned to water! It must be pleasant to go out with the knowledge that your betrayal will cost the lives of all your people!"

"Hurry and get it over with!" groaned Borotoff. The officer laughed and dawdled with his arrangements, prolonging them, wishing the foreigner to suffer to the uttermost the torments of the damned. They did not bind Borotoff, for he could scarcely stand as it was.

Lazily, the officer gave the command which formed the firing squad of eight men into a single rank, facing the condemned. The soldiers were grinning, and not one of them used blanks. The Chinese soldier does not like to be cheated, and blood on his soul troubles him not at all.

The officer strode to the right of the line. He faced Borotoff and stood for a full minute, staring at the prisoner.

To his ears came the sound of an airplane motor, but it meant nothing to him. He knew that Shan was sending out planes in many directions.

"Listen to the plane, Borotoff," said the Chinese officer, "for it is the last time you'll ever hear the sound, and it is fitting that the drone of a motor should be your requiem, don't you think?"

Borotoff, who had been holding his breath, bracing himself for the bullets which would soon come, let his breath out in a veritable explosion, and the officer laughed again. He drew his sword with ghastly deliberation, watching the bloody face of the condemned for any sign that Borotoff might yet beg for mercy.

BUT Borotoff gave no sign. He closed his eyes, swayed a little, but snapped them open again and stared, unafraid, at death, trying to forget in his last moments his awful betrayal.

The officer snapped a command at the firing squad.

"Firing squad, load!"

A rattle of bolts as cartridges slashed into chambers and bolts clicked home.

"Make ready!"

Left feet advanced to steady the body for firing from the standing position. Closer now sounded the roaring of that airplane motor invisible behind the wall against which Borotoff leaned. Its sound caused the officer to speak louder, to make sure that his killers heard.

"At the heart take aim!"

Up came the rifles, butts against shoulders, brown cheeks against cold stocks. A nervous finger might launch a bullet before the command came, but every man knew that he might die by decapitation if he fired prematurely, and not a rifle spoke. The officer grinned at Borotoff, saw his chest swell as he stared at those grim rifle muzzles. It pleased

the officer to tantalize the men he executed.

His lips opened to call out "fire." It was necessary to shout at the top of his lungs to make himself heard, for the plane's roaring would drown his voice. The officer decided to hold the final, fatal command until the plane had flown over, since it would give Borotoff that much longer to ponder on his sins.

The propeller of the plane slipped over the wall, the wheels of the ship almost touching. Right over the wall the nose of the plane dipped, and the pilot was fish-tailing his ship, so that its nose worked from right to left and back again.

A hail of bullets poured into the faces of the firing squad. At the first rattle of machine-gun fire, Borotoff dropped to his knees. Several bullets smacked into the wall behind him, through the space he had occupied a moment before.

Laube had caught them with their fingers on the triggers. His first bullet smote the Chinese officer in the chest. Then lead sprayed into the firing squad, which fell like ninepins.

The convulsive gripping of dying hands fired four or five of the rifles held on the prisoner but no bullet touched him.

THEN Laube, as the barracks began to empty at the sound of firing, banked on a dime, cut his gun, and slid down onto the familiar parade ground to a landing. He could not roll clear up to Borotoff, for the dead firing squad obstructed the passsage.

Already rifles were hurling bullets at him from all directions.

Laube kicked his ship around, its right wings covering the soldiers who now lay motionless on the ground.

"Hurry, Borotoff," he called. "They'll get us any second!"

The face of Borotoff was transfigured, but he seemed incapable of moving.

"I've been tortured," he mumbled, "you'll have to help me!"

"I'm tied into this crate as tight as a sardine," called Laube, "and if I could even get out, I'd probably fall apart. Try to make it, for the love of God!"

Borotoff reached the plane somehow, and Laube helped him in. He fainted beside Laube, and Laube, as he taxied about for the take off, had to hold his body to keep Borotoff's tortured nether limbs from interfering with the rudder bar or the stick.

Laube took off in the face of hundreds of soldiers, and his plane's wings looked like a sieve as he jerked her off the frozen parade.

High over Mukden he looked down, wondering why no planes took off after him. There were plenty at the arsenal, despite those he had stolen or destroyed. He shook his head as no move was made against him.

Even as he wondered, three planes, heavily burdened with Sutton projectiles, were within five miles of Nevsky, closing in with the certainty of a trio of winged juggernauts.

Beside Laube, Borotoff stirred and moaned. There was something he must tell Laube.

Two hours later, just before Nevsky came into view through a cleft in the mountains, Borotoff regained consciousness and screamed until his voice could be heard even above the roaring of the motors:

"By now they've wiped out Nevsky and my people!"

Laube grinned at him and shook his head, but Borotoff was too nearly insane to comprehend.

At last they peered down on Nevsky, and for a minute or two Laube had to let the plane fly out of control. Both his hands were needed to keep Borotoff from plunging over the side.

Laube finally had to hit him in the face to quiet him. There was little wonder that Borotoff was practically in-

sane. Down under them were the ruins of the village Borotoff had betrayed. Flames speared into the sky from the village's buildings, every one of which was being devoured by the red destroyer.

GREAT holes showed in the ground all about the place, and the spot whence Laube had taken off that morning was literally pockmarked with holes, left after the bombs had exploded. The plane rocked and bucked in the crazy current of air set up by the pockets in the hills and by the heat of the flames that were consuming Nevsky.

Borotoff was still looking down. His face was working wildly. It was pale, even through the blood.

For a moment Laube cut his gun and held the stick with his knees, while he tried to quiet Borotoff.

"Listen," he snapped. "Cut out the heroics! I know the Chinese, and I don't blame you for squealing. I knew you would. There isn't a foreigner living who could go through a Chinese torturing bee without yelling his head off —babbling every secret he knew, including his middle name. I knew you would do it if you lived last night, and the three who were with you said they had seen you taken alive. I gave the necessary orders before I left this morning."

Borotoff stared at Laube as though afraid to believe his own ears.

His eyes became less wild as he listened and read the truth in the eyes of Laube.

"You mean the villagers cleared out before the planes got here?" quavered Borotoff, the words disjointed and poorly enunciated. Even his lips and tongue had experienced the peculiar genius of Chinese torturers.

Laube nodded.

"They're safe," he said, "a darned sight safer than we are, since we haven't a place to land. They got away before sunrise, and the flyers probably never even missed them. Nobody ran out of the houses, true. But they would have expected the people to remain inside as being the safest. They believed that the flames had accounted for all of your people, else they would still be here, dropping bombs and using their machine guns. They're gone, and will report to Shan that the village of Nevsky has been wiped out completely!"

Borotoff shuddered and Laube read a question in his eyes.

"Your people need never know that you babbled," he said, "unless you wish me to tell them, or you tell them yourself! But if you do tell them, every last one of them, man or woman, will forgive you. No man can stand up to the Chinese torture chamber."

"Then," repeated Borotoff, "my people are safe!"

"As safe as though they were in a church!"

Then he stiffened. He was still volplaning, with his prop barely ticking over, so that Borotoff might hear his words. In the ears of both, from somewhere in the more precipitous mountains ahead, sounded the shrill yammering of machine guns.

In that direction the people of Nevsky had gone that morning before sunrise.

Had the flyers for Shan guessed or noted the trail, and gone in pursuit?

Ruined Nevsky was left behind, as Laube gave the ship full gun and hurtled into the mountains like a madman.

What would he find, up there where machine guns chattered?

CHAPTER VI.

STRANGE WINGS.

SAVAGELY he fed the gun, while a terrible doubt came up and gripped his brain. Had the minions of Shan seen the snow trail of the White Russians who had escaped into the mountains? If they had, then they could

have killed them all in perfect safety, from the vantage point of the sky.

Laube jerked impatiently in his seat, angry because, though the plane was revving up to the limit, she still did not travel fast enough to suit him. His convulsive shudders caused Borotoff to wince, and a pain to shoot through Laube's body—which reminded him of his own wounds, and that he was likely to open a few of them. He had already lost quite enough blood.

The way led down a snaky valley, unmarred by the habitations of men. Crags to the right and left gave vistas of strange, weird ravines, in which many things might happen.

The valley curved and ended in a cul-de-sac, but Laube merely nosed up, and slid over into the Basin of the Dead.

There, in the center of the valley, a battle of the skies was taking place. Three planes against three, and three of the planes were not from Mukden! Laube stared, his eyes very wide, as he hurled toward the thick of the mêlée.

What planes were these, and who flew them? They were two-place jobs, and they seemed to be piloted by men who knew their air—two men in each plane.

Then the idea came. These planes were Russian ships, from near the Sungari or Progranichnaya, and they had been patrolling inland from the border, keeping to the mountains to make sure they encountered no Chinese flyers—because war had not actually been declared between Russia and China, though the talk between the two countries was plainly belligerent.

Their planes had encountered the planes of the White Russians! Popov, knowing the insignia on those ships, had attacked or had been attacked.

AS he closed in, one of the two-place planes nosed over and dived swiftly down to the valley floor. It burst into flames before it struck, and its gas tanks went with a roar. Laube laughed aloud into the slip stream, as he saw a second plane start an erratic course for the ground.

These flyers of Nevsky were poison! They were in and out like falcons, striking, getting away, easily eluding the fangs of their enemies. The two-place ships were fully armed with prop-synchronized guns and had bracketed guns in the after pits. They had plenty of bullets, but the little planes of the exiles were too fast to form other than the most fleeting targets.

The second plane went down, struck the basin floor and stood on its nose. Off to the right was a strip of woods, out of which raced a score of furred figures. The Russians on the ground were taking prisoners. The two from the plane came to their feet, with mittened right hands lifted and flames spurting from their hands. A White Russian went down, floundering in the snow; but he was only wounded, and before the visitors could fire again they were overpowered.

One man fought on until he was killed. But the other was marched away.

The three planes ducked, dived and swooped above the last of the Red planes.

Then, at an imperious gestured command from Popov, the plane started down, feeling for a landing. It struck and skidded all over the place, but remained upright. Its pilot and observer were taken prisoner.

The three planes swung in behind Laube. Popov drew alongside and beckoned Laube to follow him, after which he curved away toward the walled amphitheater to the right, where he started down in a stall landing.

Then, one by one, the four planes of the exiles went down and landed. Grinning Russians came to take them in charge, and Laube watched them disappear into the woods near at hand.

They were absolutely swallowed up in a matter of seconds.

Five minutes later and Popov, his two other flyers and Laube and Borotoff were inside a cave that had been hand-hewn out of the living rock of the walls surrounding the basin. Laube knew where he was, but he looked about him with interest. Heretofore he had merely flown over.

The cave was a huge place, and the merrily blazing fire in its center was cheery in the extreme. The smoke went up through a hole, barely visible in the ceiling. Centuries past, the caves had been used as tombs for the royal Manchus.

Laube turned to Popov. "Let's have a look at our prisoners."

THE men who had been brought down by the planes of the exiles were hustled into the cave. They were stocky, with thick lips and dark eyes. Sullenly, they stood, three of them, staring from face to face in the cave.

Then one of them caught the eyes of Popov. His own eyes flamed furiously. It took three men to keep him from leaping upon Popov. His lips drooled bitter curses, which were unintelligible because fury made it impossible for the man to enunciate. Laube studied the face of Popov. It was cold as marble, and the eyes bored into those of the prisoner. In the old days, Laube knew, Popov would have stared thus at a serf.

"Popov!" he finally shrieked. "Popov, of the house of Romanov! And it is I, Serge Geda, who have found you! The word has been out for you all through Siberia. Any man who finds you, wherever he finds you, may slay you and claim a reward of a million roubles——"

"The price of princes, my dear Laube," said Popov with a grin, "is not as high as one might expect, considering the value of roubles!"

He spoke in Russian deliberately, so that the prisoner might understand.

"It is too high!" shouted Geda. "I would do it for nothing! I would pay for the privilege of cutting you to pieces! We thought we had made a clean sweep of the Romanovs! Now nothing in the world can prevent war. The lily-handed Popov, who never did a day's work in his life! A woman in the shape of a man! Even now, he allows his friends to hold me, fearing that I may get my hands on him!"

Popov was goading Geda, hoping for disclosures. He had got them. But unless Geda got back across the border, no one in Siberia would know of the White Russians who flew in Chinese fighting planes. On his part Serge Geda, inoculated with hatred for anything that even savored of the massacred Romanovs, was trying to bait Popov into a fight. Popov removed his holstered pistol, which he tossed to Laube.

Serge Geda grinned, as his captors made sure that he bore no arms.

Popov looked at his watch.

"It will take me two minutes," he said to Geda, "to prove to you that white hands may be controlled by brains, brains that are real and aren't like maggots working!"

A chill had touched the eyes of Popov. In them was shadowed the memory of the past. This man, and others like him, had overthrown the czar and sent Popov and his people into exile. In Serge Geda, Popov could visualize the Red destruction which had turned Russia into a flaming hell.

Geda, released from his captors, hurled himself at Popov. Laube, nonchalantly smoking, stepped aside to be in the clear.

Geda would have made two of Popov. He was a bull, Popov a terrier. One swipe of Geda's mighty fists, and Popov might be killed. He was as slender as a woman. His arms were not half the size of Geda's, but they were well proportioned.

POPOV moved to meet Geda's charge as casually as though he were merely going for a stroll.

But at the very moment of meeting, Popov galvanized into swift action. He stepped aside, forcing Geda to miss his first mad swing. Then he stepped back inside those flailing arms, and his fists cracked like exploding firecrackers against the whiskered jaws of Geda. Geda reeled like a limb in the wind, but he kept his feet. His lips, split and bleeding, mouthed the wildest oaths known to the Russian tongue.

But Popov was like a streak of light. Savage blows hurled at him by Geda seemed to slide off his head or shoulders like water off the back of a duck, and his fists, white and small as those of Laube's, rattled and smacked against the face and chin of Geda.

"Thirty seconds gone, Popov," said Laube softly.

Popov nodded and dropped below a wild swing at his jaw, which, had it landed, might have broken his neck. Then he was in once more, and his fists were pounding in their never ending tattoo, while Geda was striving to get his balance for a new attack.

"I'll show you, Geda!" spat Popov. "It isn't a light thing to curse your betters! Haven't you been taught that?"

Geda's answer was another stream of oaths, and Popov increased his speed. His fists landed with louder impact, and every time they landed the blood spurted from the lips and face of Geda. Popov had again become the royalist of old Russia, administering punishment to a peasant who had angered him.

"Ten seconds to go, Popov," Laube said at last.

With a fresh burst of speed, Popov set himself to finish Geda. When the big man finally crumpled to the floor, his swollen eyes filled with sudden fear of this man's hands, there were still three seconds left of the promised two minutes.

"Dog!" spat Popov. "Over in Russia you might be my master, but we are not in Russia, and if we ever meet again outside that country, come to me on your knees, you comprehend?"

From the battered lips of the half-conscious Geda came the quavering answer:

"Yes, excellency!"

Then Geda seemed to relax with a sigh, and for a second or two the men at the door relaxed, too. Geda was on his feet, had bowled them over, and was out of the cave door before any one could lay hands on him. He ran a zigzag course for the trees, while bullets from several guns kicked up the snow about his barging feet. But he gained the woods and vanished into them.

"If he gets away," said Laube softly, "he'll come back with a force big enough to wipe this basin off the map! I gather from what he said that Russia would like to be sure that Nicholas Feodor Popov is dead!"

But Popov's face was cold as ice; he made no answer to Laube.

"He can't get far without food," said Laube. But Popov said nothing. That haunting shadow was back in his eyes again. It seemed that he could see more in the temporary escape of Geda than could Laube.

Laube was just preparing to call the leaders of the exiles together to lay out a plan of action, when over the basin sounded suddenly a scream of savage anger, the barking of a pistol, and the shouts of men mortally wounded.

Mingled with that noise was the scream of a woman, ending short as though a hand had covered her mouth.

CHAPTER VII.

GEDA'S GET-AWAY.

LAUBE forgot his wounds as he raced from the cave and darted out into the snow, on the trail of the man who had escaped them. They knew—Popov, Laube and the others—that Geda was

behind that scream. Laube, with a queer, unaccustomed tugging at the heart, was sure that the scream had come from the lips of Olga.

Yet, what was she doing out there in the woods where the planes were hidden? He had thought she was caring for the tortured Borotoff. However, no use to ask questions now, as he raced with the others in the direction whence the sound had come.

Just before they reached the edge of the woods there came the sound of a blasting motor!

Laube did not pause. He bit the stem of his corncob until he almost snapped it, and his knuckles were white on the handle of his swagger stick.

They broke through the woods to the place where the planes stood.

Two of the exiles had apparently pulled the prop for him, and tailed the ship around for a run out into the snow. They had done it to save the life of the cameo-cheeked Olga, the good Samaritan of the exiles. Two men lay dead in the snow, which was dyed red with their blood. Two other men, their faces cold and savage, were holding the wings of the plane at Serge Geda's command.

HE was holding them back with Olga, whom every man of the White Russians all but worshiped—a princess, Laube had been told, and a thoroughbred. His teeth grated together as he thought of the hands of Serge Geda, already stained with the blood of murder, touching the person of Olga.

She was standing beside the fuselage of the plane, with her back to it, and her eyes were staring up toward the heavens. The heavy hand of Serge Geda, fastened in her long golden hair, twisted it until Olga could not move.

Serge Geda saw them coming and cut the gun of the plane to grin at Popov.

"You see how a man can make a fool of a so-called gentleman, Popov!" he yelled. "In your place I would shoot *me* full of lead, no matter how many of them hit this white-faced trollop here. But with you in your place, and me in mine, you'll let me get away because you wouldn't have a bit of harm come to the hair of this woman's head!

"Keep back! I know there are some good shots among you, and that you could easily hit me without touching this woman, but you won't. You know that, even if I were dying, I'd kill her before you could get to me! All I'd have to do would be to yank her head —against the side of the plane, right where the ribs are."

Laube dragged to a stop. From all sides the exiles were racing to the scene of the trouble. Laube stared at the faces of the two dead men on the ground. One of them was Borotoff. But how had Borotoff come there? That Geda had killed the two men he knew. But Borotoff was supposed to be in bed, and Olga was supposed to be nursing him.

"Of course," Geda went on, "I know perfectly well that as soon as I get off all your planes will be after me—and a lot of bullets will fly about my ears as I start away, and before I get off——"

His voice was drowned out by the roaring of the motor. The mouth of Olga opened, but the sounds drowned her words, though Laube could plainly read them on her lips.

"Go ahead and shoot, for the love of God!"

But there was no man among them who would chance it, not even Laube. At any other time he would have drilled Geda between the eyes, knowing that with all his boasting he would die instantly, before he had a chance to carry out his threat against Olga Karnief. But Laube made no move. For the first time since he could remember, he trembled in a tight place. Was it because of Olga? He knew he could drill Geda, but he simply couldn't force his hands

to obey his will, and his weapon rested in his holster, untouched.

SOMETHING he had never experienced before, some new feeling, tore at his heart as his eyes fastened to the white face of Olga. Even to himself, he would not admit the presence of that feeling. He had scarcely exchanged half a dozen words with her. Yet here he was, as motionless as the others, because she was in danger.

A dense crowd of white-faced men stood in a semicircle about the plane, while Geda laughed at them all. He knew his audience, and he was enjoying himself. The motor was sufficiently warmed. It hadn't cooled appreciably since Popov had landed. The stage was set for a quick get-away.

Geda cut the gun to idling again, and shouted to the exiles.

"It is a great jest, Popov! You might whip me with your fists, but I show you that a peasant may have brains, is it not so? And to prove that I understand exactly what would happen to me the minute I flew away from here, I'm going to make it impossible to do anything against me!"

A gasp of horror burst from the lips of the watchers as Geda suddenly half rose, caught Olga Karnief by the shoulders and dragged her quickly up into the plane with him. She fought at him. He caught her wrists with one hand and held her helpless. Geda was a bear of a man.

Then he spoke again.

"I like this woman," he shouted, "and in new Russia when we like a woman—well, the matter is always easily arranged! She goes back with me, and what happens to her in Siberia depends entirely upon her! But bullets fired at me may strike her, and if any one follows me, there are so many women in this world that one is unimportant, and I will not mind throwing this one over the side! You understand me?"

Frozen to stone, like so many graven images, the exiles stood, and Serge Geda, one man against a thousand, was winning out.

Geda shouted again.

"This is a nice place, but when I come back, to pay Popov for that drubbing and the nasty things he said, there'll be plenty of people with me, some by air, some by train—for foot troops must consolidate ground positions, eh?"

Laube started. In his desire to bait these White Russians, Serge Geda was talking too much. His words hinted that Russian soldiers were already en route into Manchuria, or soon would be. That his action against his hereditary enemies would be swift went without saying, for he would not wish to give them a chance to move to a safer place.

THE ship blasted savagely and headed through the lane in the trees out into the snow. Serge Geda swung into the wind, and the plane roared. Then it was off, circling for altitude.

"Popov," said Laube grimly, "we can't be soft-hearted about this. Get those other two prisoners and make them talk. Find out where Geda will head for, what town in Siberia. Torture them as ruthlessly as Borotoff was tortured by the Chinese! If you get chicken-hearted, just remember what their friend, Serge Geda, has done to Olga Karnief! Get the information if you have to kill them to get it!"

"I'll do that," said Popov coldly, "and I know how to handle such swine!"

"Take them to the most distant cave," continued Laube savagely, "where the women won't be able to hear! I'll be in the cave we just left when you are ready. But make it fast. We're all flying again—soon!"

"In ten minutes I will have the information, or the prisoners will be dead!" As Popov said it, it did not sound savage or brutal, for he spoke almost casually, as a man speaks who

states a fact of no particular importance.

Laube stepped forward and peered down at Borotoff and a second man whose face he did not know.

"Borotoff, old-timer," he said, "you've got a little more than your share of tough breaks hereabouts, but somehow it'll be atoned for—everything!"

Laube turned his back on the two dead men, whose heads had been cracked open by savage blows of a club, and calmly knocked out the dottle in his pipe, refilled it and struck a match.

But he scarcely knew what he was doing, did not see the things on which his eyes were focused. He saw Olga Karnief, in the hands of Serge Geda, flying over the cold wastes into Siberia.

But he did not hurry.

His knuckles grew white on the handle of his swagger stick, and as he strode to the cave, he would have walked straight into people, had they not noted the icy glitter in his eyes and made haste to clear the way for him.

For the light in his eyes was a light that meant murder.

CHAPTER VIII.

WINGS OF VENGEANCE.

IN less than ten minutes Popov came back. There was no change of expression on his face. He merely nodded at Laube. Beside Popov were five others. One was a small man named Semenoff, who might have been blood brother to Laube. One was named Dimitri Radziwill, and Dimitri was as big as Serge Geda. Then there was Markov, a silent, morose man, and Ivan Karkovitch, slender as a woman, but with a paw that spoke of resolution beyond the average—and Boris Domzalski.

"The name of the place?" snapped Laube.

"I have it," replied Popov, naming a town just beyond the border of Siberia, "and our prisoners are still alive!"

"Keep them under guard!" rasped Laube. "From now on we take pity on no living soul. There will be none to pity us if we fail."

There was a moment of silence. Hundreds of the exiles stood about. A murmur rose among them, a murmur that grew and grew in volume until it became a menacing roar of savagery. Behind that roar, Laube could see a thousand deeds of Red violence.

Laube nodded his approval.

"Two of the Russian planes can be used. We have four of our own. Get extra men to ride the after pits of the two-place ships. We take off as soon as you are ready."

"Gasoline?" barked Popov.

"We take off with what we have. When it is exhausted, we get it where we can."

"Where do we go?"

"Into Siberia to return Olga to the basin!"

"And if we are seen by Lung Hsi Shan's flyers?"

"We do not swerve from our course for any living thing! You understand?"

"And what happens when we return?"

"Every cave will be barricaded as well as it can be managed. For twelve hours a day every able-bodied man and woman in the basin will work. Some caves will be set aside for storage purposes. They will be stocked with food. The water supply will be checked and water rationed out. Foraging parties will travel at night to pick up goats, sheep, pigs, chickens—anything that is edible!"

LESS than an hour after Serge Geda had vanished over the mountains, the two-place ships and the four Chinese planes were lined up, ready to take off.

The gasoline had been properly apportioned. Every man was armed to the teeth. Laube's swagger stick was in its holster in the side of his pit. There

were bombs in the bomb racks of the Russian two-place planes.

Laube was first off the ground. Then the other planes were off and climbing swiftly out of the Basin of the Dead. When they had full clearance, Laube began to circle for altitude. At five thousand feet above the basin, he leveled off. Laube flew point, with the two-place ships to his right and left, and the Boeings bringing up the rear.

They were flying at eight thousand when the observer in the two-place plane to Laube's right pointed off toward Mukden. Off there, rising and falling in the chill afternoon air, was a flight of eight planes!

The planes were plainly coming to cut off those led by Laube. But how had Lung Hsi Shan known that they were a-wing? Laube was sure that the planes which had destroyed Nevsky had returned without discovering that they had been cheated.

Laube shook his head. He looked right and left. The faces of the White Russians were turned toward him, and he could read the question in them. But he gave no sign. After one look at the swiftly oncoming planes, he looked straight ahead, his pipe gripped tightly in his teeth.

A bit later he looked at his flyers again. Each one looked straight to the front, their faces grim and harsh. Laube half smiled. He was leading a squadron which could be depended upon, even to death.

They held steadily to their course. Not a man would fail him.

Half an hour later, the eight planes were almost paralleling their course—close enough for them to make out that the planes were indeed those of Lung Hsi Shan.

Out of the tail of his eye, Laube saw the flight leader of the Shan squadron give the signal to attack.

But he himself gave no signal. He held steadily on his course.

The Shan flyers swept into formation and began angling in.

THE safest way to break out of a formation when there is no warning signal is to dive. Laube dived. He did not signal to his flyers, and five ships flew straight on as Laube put his nose down and fed the gas to his Boeing. His lips were a straight line, his eyes ominously narrowed, his face a mask of determination.

Had the White Russian formation broken up and banked to face the attack of the Chinese, they might have understood the maneuver and known how to meet it. But this method of attack, used by Laube, took them by surprise—it was unorthodox besides.

Laube dived and was instantly below his own planes. Below he banked right, leveled off, brought his stick back into his stomach, held it steady with his knees and his hands fell to the trips of his guns.

His guns set up their savage song of death, and Laube held his ship steady, her prop boring straight at the center of the Shan formation. He had no intention of changing his course until he had passed completely through the formation. No formation, he knew, could stand such an attack. Every flyer would fancy that whirling prop, with smoke bathing the spinner cap to show prop-synchronized guns in action, was aimed directly at himself.

Each one would swerve, or at least hesitate, and the whole formation would thus be thrown instantly into confusion. There might even be collisions.

The first plane ahead of him zoomed. He let a burst go rocketing into the flyer's belly but shook his head slightly as he realized that the bullets were missing the pilot. Behind the zooming flyer, another man stood on his tail to escape collision and hung for a moment before falling away—a perfect target.

Laube dropped the nose of his Boeing

to cover. His guns bucked and clattered.

Laube concentrated on this for a second, while his Boeing sliced right into the Shan formation. His teeth were exposed in a snarl of intense fury. What right had these men to betray the Young General? What right had they to try to prevent these exiles from reclaiming their own from Serge Geda?

Into the formation, yawing to right and left, stick held between his knees, guns spewing their leaden hail up and down, to right and to left, Laube hurled his Boeing. Planes gave away, and, when Laube had passed through, the formation looked like a flock of chickens, frightened by the shadow of a darting hawk.

Laube stood on his tail in a mighty zoom, guns still, and looked back at the demoralized Shan squadron.

ONE plane, wreathed in black smoke, was rolling over and over, down the sky. Laube watched it with satisfaction, until the inevitable orange-and-red flames burst from under the motor housing and bathed the tip-tilted wings.

He saw a bundle catapult from the cockpit and go somersaulting over and over. The Chinese pilot had jumped to keep from roasting. Laube shrugged. The pilot showed wisdom—for a tool of Shan. Yet the end in either case was inevitable, for the ground was several thousand feet below.

Laube went back through that formation, his guns spitting again.

The Shan flyers gave way fearfully. Laube dived down under his squadron, which had not faltered one iota from its course, save that Popov, by a crossover, had slipped into the point position.

Laube looked up and saw Popov peering over the coaming, down into his face. Laube nodded and began to nose up. Popov dived like a plummet, and Laube zoomed into position at point. The other ships still held their positions, deadheading at the speed of the slowest ship toward the border.

Laube looked straight to the front, until he had got the direction in his mind again. Then he held the stick with his left hand and watched Feodor Popov. The Russian prince was climbing upward into the thick of the Shan planes, and the bullets were spewing from his guns in steady, twin streams.

One Shan ship broke free and tried to ape Laube's recent maneuver. He headed straight for the center of the White Russian juggernaut of planes.

Quick as a flash Popov saw the move. His nose swerved to take in the belly of that other plane, and Laube saw his tracers slash across the cockpit of the Shan plane. The plane seemed to falter in mid-stride. Its left wing was down, its right toward the sky.

Laube saw the flyer slump on the downward edge of his cockpit coaming; he even saw the blood smear over his face. With a vast swoop, motor full on, the sideslip began.

Laube saw the plane right itself and fly level for a moment. Then its nose came up, and its tail pointed at the ground. Thus for a moment it fell, seeming to diminish in size as it dropped. Then the nose got down, and the fatal dive continued. Laube saw the plane drop into the soil and scatter its wreckage over the virgin white of the snow.

POPOV, unconcerned, unmarked, was back at his proper position in the formation, and the White Juggernaut headed straight on toward Siberia, while the Shan flight cut away to lick at its wounds and to formulate a new plan of attack. Laube stared at the faces of his pilots, such of them as he could see.

On his right was a two-place ship, whose observer was watching Laube. When their eyes met, the Russian patted his bracketed gun and grinned. Laube shook his head.

The man on Laube's left was looking straight to the front. So were the other pilots. Laube had brought home to them that this was not an expedition for mere fighting. The White Juggernaut was en route to Siberia—to bring back Olga Karnief.

Laube looked at the Shan flyers.

Their formation was breaking up. Six planes left, and it seemed that every man was for himself.

Then Laube guessed what they planned. Each of the Shan flyers had been assigned an opponent in the squadron led by Laube. He looked again at his flyers, as the Chinese planes circled away, some to climb, some to dive, some to drop back behind the Russians, some to race ahead.

His pilots studied him, watching for signals.

When the Shan formation was no longer a formation but merely six scattered planes, Laube suddenly rocked his wings—to signal that every man was for himself.

Instantly the White Juggernaut broke into its several component parts. Each flyer picked out his Chinese opponent and banked toward him with deadly intensity of purpose.

CHAPTER IX.

SIBERIAN DARKNESS.

NOW the Chinese flyers were circling in. But Laube's flyers had beaten them to the initiative by picking out their respective opponents and charging at top speed. The White Russians were fighters, fearless ones, and they were men whom life had embittered.

"I'd hate to have them as enemies," Laube told himself, as his plane hung on its right wing and its nose cut about to take the sixth of the Shan flyers. The prop of his enemy was visible in his sights, and Laube let go a long burst. The prop of the other ship vanished. Finally, when the flyer frantically cut the gun to keep his motor from vibrating out of her bed, what was left of the prop was visible—just a few splinters about the spinner cap. The Chinese flyer was fighting his ship, starting down for a forced landing. Laube let him go and looked around at the battle.

The two-place ships had little trouble. The Chinese were afraid of those prop-synchronized guns, whose play was backed by the bracketed guns in the after pits. They refused to join in battle. Two ships cut out for Mukden, and the two-place jobs swung in swiftly behind Laube.

Laube looked over and back. The three other Boeings were fighting madly. They were like hawks after sparrows, their flying far superior to that of the Chinese, despite the fact that the Chinese also flew Boeings, and had the same armament.

One Chinese flyer went down. Another was locked wing to wing with one of the White Russians. Laube studied that Russian ship dispassionately. It was the ship flown by Semenoff. Laube shrugged and shook his head. He had hoped to get through without a casualty. But it seemed too much to expect. The two ships were falling, still welded together. Flames were shooting from under the motor housing of the Boeing of Semenoff. The flames bathed both ships.

Laub saw Semenoff poise on the cockpit coaming, then leap straight across the space, his arms clutching at the figure of the Chinese pilot—a futile gesture, since the fate of them both was sealed. But Laube's eyes glowed, just the same. Semenoff was going out like a man. So was the Chinese. His arms swept around Semenoff, and Semenoff pulled himself into the pit with the Chinese. There they fought savagely, while their flaming ships plunged down to the snow-covered plain, which almost entirely surrounds Mukden and extends for miles in all directions.

SEMENOFF won. The Chinese pilot somersaulted over and over, diving for the ground. Then his somersaulting ceased, and he fell head downward. The flames were licking at the form of Semenoff, who stood in the pit.

Semenoff raised his eyes, then lifted his hand in salute to the White Squadron. Laube waved back. Semenoff's hand dropped to his side. His eyes peered over the side and studied the licking tongues of flame which reached out at him.

Without another glance at Laube and his own comrades, Semenoff dived over the side, head foremost. It was better than roasting.

Two Boeings closed swiftly on the White Juggernaut. Three other Boeings raced top speed for Mukden, and Laube grinned wryly as he thought of how Lung Hsi Shan would receive these flyers who had failed.

"He'll try to locate the hide-out of the White Russians," thought Laube, "and wipe it off the map by the ground route."

He shrugged. Things must be taken as they came.

Three single-seaters and two two-place ships headed straight for Siberia. When darkness fell over the land they came in closer to Laube, who flew as straight for his destination as though he had been a homing pigeon. Just what would be Geda's first act upon arriving in Progranichnaya?

"He'd want to boast—to make Olga feel his power—before he actually tried to harm her," Laube concluded.

Russian troops, he knew, were massing on the border. Russian officers would know what ships were out. These six planes would be instantly spotted as those of enemies. But Laube scarcely expected an attack by air, until afterward.

Chance, he hoped, would lead him to Olga Karnief. After that—well, matters usually arranged themselves.

Far ahead Laube saw the lights of Progranichnaya. Below he knew there would be Russian troops, and perhaps planes. But the Russians would scarcely be expecting the Chinese to fly so casually across the border. They might watch and report, but they would do nothing—such was Laube's hope.

He cut away to the left of the town and waggled his wings. His flyers eased their throttles as Laube dived down to look over the land. Laube studied it carefully, as carefully as he could with the poor light. Then, taking a deep breath, he felt for the ground with his wheels. He touched, bounced, ground to a stop. He climbed out and looked over the land quickly.

THEN he took out a flash light, pointed it at the sky and blinked it on and off. The five other ships came swiftly down. Without hesitation, afraid of nothing, the Russians landed, rolling to a stop. Swiftly their ships were tailed around beside Laube's Boeing. Their faces, as they strode to Laube, were white and strained.

They were back under Red dominion, and the fact weighed upon them—brought back memories. On an impulse which he scarcely understood, Laube clapped each one of them on the shoulder before he spoke.

"Have to take a chance on some one finding the planes," he said. "If we left a guard, they'd get him and the planes, too. Ready?"

A soft murmur of assent rose from the Russians. Laube flicked his leg with his swagger stick. No need to tell these White Russians of the deadly danger into which they were going.

"We'll separate at the edge of the town," he went on, "but each of you keep me in sight. When I get into action, close in, and we'll all do the best we know how!"

They nodded quickly. Their hands made sure of their weapons. Popov

walked at Laube's right hand. The darkness of a Siberian winter night settled over them, a pall of gloom—utterly cold, utterly still, save that sounds of revelry came from the direction of Progranichnaya.

Laube set off at a fast pace, the smoke from his pipe trailing behind him. He could travel swiftly on foot, and the others had to extend themselves to keep pace with him.

He spoke but once as they approached the town.

"Keep your ears open. People may say something that will help us."

The sounds of revelry came louder—men shouting drinking songs, toasting one another loudly—the banging of tankards on wooden table tops—big men with red-rimmed eyes, Cossacks, Reds, some good men among the scum. Yet all owed allegiance to some commissar who had gained his post by sheer brutality.

"The Russians Shan kicked off the Eastern will be here," Laube mused. "They'll all know me, too. But I've got to take the chance."

The darkness gave no answer. Steaming breath mounted skyward from the lips of the men at Laube's heels.

They reached the edge of the town. Laube paused.

"We split here," he said, "but keep me in sight. And avoid any argument whatever, and no fights unless I start them, understand?"

A murmur of assent answered him. He waved his swagger stick. The six others vanished into the shadows.

Laube was left alone and, for once, he felt the pangs of loneliness.

He'd be forty in a few years, and there wasn't a living soul who cared whether he lived or died. Hitherto, his work had been sufficient for him. Now it was inadequate, and Laube faced the facts squarely. He needed Olga with all his heart and soul. Well, she might not feel the same way about him, and, anyway, he couldn't be sure that he'd ever have a chance to discuss the matter with her.

HE hurried down the street, looking neither to right nor left. Yet his ears missed no sound, his eyes took in everything within his vision. He was a trained observer. He had to be, in his business.

He met several hurrying soldiers, muffled figures in high fur caps. He caught a muttered curse, heard the tag end of a lewd jest, coarse laughter. At this moment, somewhere in Progranichnaya, Olga Karnief was probably the sport of men like this—but with Geda's mark on her. No one would really touch her until Geda granted permission.

He heard steps behind him, crunching in the snow—and the words for which he had been waiting.

"Geda is at"—naming some sort of a restaurant—"and boasting as usual. Brought some woman back with him. But the commissar will probably have her before morning, if he wants her. Good thing for Geda he wasn't the flight leader of that flock of planes that didn't come back. The commissar would have his ears!"

"No, he's in the clear," came the muffled answer, "and may even lead the flyers who go back to investigate what happened over the border. But if the woman were mine, I'd hide her out some place."

"It isn't often that a pretty woman falls into Geda's hands, and I suppose he wants to show off for the benefit of the others."

Laube quickened his pace as they passed him, straining his ears to catch every sound.

"Well, who cares?" said the first speaker. "Geda is spending the roubles to-night, and there will be food and drink!"

"And the restaurant so crowded it will be impossible to get one or the other!"

A tautness came to Laube as he listened. They were coming into the brighter part of town, and, at any moment now, some one might wonder about him and ask questions. His pipe and his swagger stick were dead give-aways, but he never flew under false colors. He wouldn't have left them behind, even if the thought had occurred to him.

In the lighter places he pulled his neck deep into his fur flying togs and bored ahead. Louder and louder came the sounds of revelry.

Then a door opened, and sounds spilled out into the street.

The two whom Laube had been following, paused before a door, opened it and went inside.

Laube turned and looked about him. There were moving figures, but he had marked the stride of each one. Casually he lighted his pipe, allowing the flame of his match to show his face for an instant. The moving figures vanished. He knew they were closing in on the restaurant from all sides—six men against an unknown number, each one of whom would shoot to kill these exiles.

Laube waited for five minutes. One or two people came out of the restaurant, and Laube's ears tingled at the things he heard. But he did not even glance at the men, though he could feel their eyes, curious, suspicious, boring into his back.

He knocked the dottle out of his pipe, watching the sparks drop to the snow and blot themselves out. Then, he gripped tighter the handle of his swagger stick, opened the door of the restaurant and strode in—alone.

CHAPTER X.

THE VEILED SINGER.

THE restaurant was a huge place, filled with the odor of food, liquor, and unbathed humanity. There were little tables about the wall at which were seated nondescript Russians. Down the center of the room ran one long table, filled to groaning with food and vodka.

There was standing room only in the restaurant, and most of that was in use. Laube had to squeeze in. The whole crowd moved when he pushed against the nearest man to find a place for himself. The man did not even look around as Laube pushed him. Everybody was pushing everybody else, anyway.

Laube studied the big man at the head of the long table and knew that he was looking at the brutal face of the commissar, whose name for the moment he could not recall. To the commissar's right sat Serge Geda, whose face was red. Geda was enjoying himself to the utmost. Officers banged their tankards on the table and shouted his name—and he flushed becomingly.

Laube, his eyes narrowed, studied the faces of Geda and the commissar and allowed his breath to slide through his lips in an inaudible whistle.

"The commissar is patting him on the back," mused Laube, "with the handle of a knife!"

When Geda faced his superior, that superior smiled and called Geda a very devil of a fellow. When Geda looked away or rose to acknowledge a toast, the eyes of the commissar glittered murderously. Laube wondered why. Had the commissar, then, already seen Olga Karnief?

Unobstrusively, Laube worked his way along the wall. Ahead, behind the far end of the table, there was a platform, and below the platform an orchestra of four pieces.

The orchestra was striking up a wailing sort of tune. Some one at the long table began to sing. The pounding of tankards began again, and the voices of men, who had drunk deeply of the fiery vodka, caused the rafters to tremble. As the Russians sang, their eyes glittered, and now and again a firm hand fell to the hilt of a sword.

AT last, still with many yards between him and the platform, Laube was blocked and could go no nearer. Since he could see Geda, it did not matter especially.

The song died away. The drapery at the back of the platform parted and a slender girl stepped out. She began to sway and swing to the strains of the orchestra. Her dance was a lithe, snaky movement at first; but, as the song mounted in cadence and increased in volume of sound, her body became a wild fountain of activity. Her hips moved quickly, yet with feline grace, while bits of song bubbled from her lips. Her eyes seemed to play mockingly over the men at the tables, who were stamping their feet in time to her singing and her dancing.

Then the girl reached the climax of her dance. She was down to a position on her heels, hands on hips, feet kicking out, yet always getting under her before she actually sat upon the floor—a Russian folk dance, as old as the race.

The men in the place rose as the speed of the dance increased. They yelled at the girl, on whose face Laube could see a trace of fear—enough to tell him that this girl did not dance because she willed to, but because some one else so willed. They called ribald jests at her, but they liked her dancing. Their stamping feet developed into a mad dance. It was thrilling—in a crude, savage way.

The dancer kissed her hands at the men and darted behind the drapery.

A sudden silence fell over the restaurant. Laube stiffened. He did not know what to expect.

"Now, comrade," came the silken voice of the commissar, "let us see if this royalist beauty of yours is all that you claim."

"She can sing," retorted Geda, arching his chest. "Do I not know? Did she not sing to me at my quarters, before I brought her here?"

A roar of laughter answered this sally.

Geda clapped his hands. Silence gripped them all like a vise. The orchestra began to play. A white hand appeared against the drapery. Laube stared. He knew that hand. He could see it clench tightly and knew that Olga was fighting for courage.

She came out. Her face was hidden behind a mask. Only her lips and eyes were visible. Slowly, swaying slightly from right to left, as though her steps were uncertain, Olga Karnief advanced to the edge of the platform.

SHE raised her hands in a little gesture, then dropped them to her sides as though realizing the futility of any appeal to these men. Her lips opened, and Laube froze to immobility with the rest. For Olga Karnief could sing!

Only a woman of courage could have sung to those men—a woman who knew herself a prisoner, with unknown terrors in prospect. Olga was proving that such courage was hers.

Her voice seemed to mount over the heads of the audience and to wing its way about the vast restaurant—to batter futile, invisible wings against the walls and the ceilings. Her song, a simple, Russian melody, gripped and tugged at the heartstrings of them all—as it gripped at the heart of Laube, who had some understanding of Russian music.

Eyes were shining, lips moving soundlessly, as men followed the words of the singer. Tankards moved to and fro, without banging the table tops. Then even this movement ceased. Geda only seemed unmoved. He studied the faces of his comrades, his lips parted in a smile, which seemed to say to them all:

"She is marvelous, isn't she? And she belongs to Serge Geda!"

Then his eyes met those of the commissar, and Geda seemed to freeze in his place as their eyes locked. Laube saw the sweat break out on Geda's face. But, of this byplay between Geda and

his superior, none save Laube was cognizant. He was looking away from Olga now, studying the men about him, noting how they were armed.

Then his eyes went back to Olga. For just a second she had hesitated in her singing. He wondered, turned and saw that her eyes were fixed directly upon Laube himself. He grinned quickly and turned away. Olga Karnief's voice seemed suddenly to be endowed with new hope, new life, as it trilled forth from her red lips and gripped the audience as though she held them all in the palms of her two small hands.

Laube looked around, then dropped to his knees and crawled toward the table, between the legs of the standing men. It was a dangerous proceeding, but the only thing he saw to do.

In a second Olga would finish her song. Wriggling his way, Laube came erect with only one man between himself and Geda.

WITH a crashing roar, the audience broke into wild applause as Olga ended and turned to vanish behind the drapery.

Loudly over the sound rang the voice of the commissar.

"Certainly, Comrade Geda," he called, "a woman who sings so wonderfully must dance divinely as well!"

"Of course, there is nothing the divine Olga cannot do. She will be pleased to do it for us, above all others!"

A great burst of laughter followed this sally. Laube made no move. The time was not yet ripe.

"Bring her back, Comrade Geda," continued the commissar, "and have her dance for us! Waiters, clear the table top! Sit, comrades, she will dance on the table!"

Laube started and his eyes narrowed. Geda leaped to his feet, as the men nearest the table started to sit down again. Geda vanished through the drapery and came back grasping the right wrist of Olga Karnief, now unmasked. Men gasped as they saw the beauty of her face.

"Onto the table, loved one!" cried Geda. "And dance your best for the commissar!"

A man suddenly put his hand to his hip as he felt his weapon taken from him. His eyes fell on a little man, eeling his way through the press. He started to open his mouth in a wild shout, but Laube spoke first, an easy drawl. His left hand held the stolen pistol, his right gripped the swagger stick tightly at the handle.

"Commissar," he said slowly, "bid that cur to release Olga Karnief, or I'll blow the back of your head off!"

That Laube could easily do it, every man in the place realized, for the muzzle of the weapon was directly against the back of the commissar's head.

"Unhand her, Geda!" choked the commissar. Geda, his face fiery red as he recognized Laube, obeyed.

"Now command the big lout to come within reach of my swagger stick!" drawled Laube again.

A menacing murmur went through the crowd as the commissar gave the order. Geda, however, did not move closer, and Laube performed a lightning-swift movement. He knew that if the crowd expected him to make such a move, he would never live to make another like it. He was depending upon the effect of surprise.

He stepped away from the commissar. The tip of his swagger stick darted out like the tongue of a serpent and struck the forehead of Serge Geda. Geda's legs started to crumple; his eyes went glassy. Laube, still holding his stick, caught the shoulder of Geda and pulled him forward. Geda sprawled at Laube's feet, and Laube, all in the same movement, was back behind the commissar, his pistol pressed against the back of the man's fat, red neck.

"You filthy curs!" said Laube softly.

"I am only sorry that I can't punish you all as I intend to punish Geda."

A SIBILANT hiss went through the crowd, which swayed toward Laube.

"Stay back, for God's sake!"

It was the voice of the commissar, inspired by a bit of added pressure on the muzzle of the pistol. The crowd froze. Geda was moaning at Laube's feet.

Olga had dashed back through the drapery. He heard her speak a name. It sounded like "Nicholas," but he could not be sure. Something cold, like an icy hand, seemed for a second to touch his heart. There had been something in the way she had spoken the name that had never been in the tone of any woman who had ever pronounced the name of Laube.

Geda was getting to his feet, his face toward Laube. Recognition was dawning there. Now, holding the pistol muzzle against the fat neck of the commissar, Laube went to work with his swagger stick. He prodded Geda in the stomach, causing him to gasp with pain. Geda's big hands reached out for Laube. They were drawn quickly back as, with two lightninglike blows, Laube smashed Geda on either wrist.

Then the tip of his stick, as though it had been the point of a saber, slashed at the face of the stealer of women. Blood instantly burst from the man's split cheeks. Another straight stab, and Geda's hands went to his nose, which was split across cheeks, distorted in agony.

"This isn't all, Geda," rasped Laube, "for I'm going to kill you before I finish! I always keep my promises! And I made one to you!"

Geda was whimpering. Laube wondered why he did not back away. He heard another sibilant hiss from the crowd and, for a brief second, raised his head to stare. Popov and Domzalski were standing on the platform, hands on hips where their weapons hung, their cold eyes surveying the crowd.

Laube was quick to grasp the advantage. He shouted a command at the crowd.

"Get your hands over your heads, as high as you can reach! Popov, Domzalski, shoot any man who is slow!"

Pistols leaped into the hands of Popov and Domzalski, and the hands of the crowd reached for the ceiling. Laube lowered his own pistol to his side and sailed into Geda with his swagger stick before him like a rapier. In two minutes Geda was on his knees, sobbing with pain.

Laube desisted at last, then turned to Domzalski and took his place beside him, while he mouthed a sharp order at Popov.

"Go among them and get their weapons. Throw them out of the door."

But that order was never destined to be carried out. From behind the drapery there came a scream of terror, the report of a firearm. The three turned as one man.

"Out you go!" yelled Laube. "Meet me where we——"

But he did not finish the order. They knew where to go. Laube sprang aside as Domzalski and Popov went through the drapery, and most of the men in the crowd went for their guns.

BULLETS smashed into the drapery and sang about the ears of Laube. But he fired coolly, twice with the pistol in his left hand. The commissar, in the act of turning, sprawled face foremost on the floor. Geda, rising to his feet, his face a mask of fury, screamed in agony and put his hands over his tortured stomach.

Laube had sent a bullet into his abdomen.

"I keep my promises, Geda," he drawled, then sprang through the drapery.

He stumbled over a body, as he heard

heavy feet strike the platform he had just left. He looked at the dead man. It was a stranger. One of Laube's men, behind the drapery, had been surprised and had fired instantly, the only thing to do. There was a door giving into an alley. Laube went through it, hurling his stolen weapon aside as he did so.

Outside the door Domzalski stepped to his side.

"This way, Baron," he said, and there was a lilting exultation in his voice. He pressed an automatic into Laube's hand.

"Popov is getting away all right. He just turned into that street. We'd better cover his retreat. He's got Olga."

Laube grinned. Domzalski seemed not to think it strange that Laube still gripped the stem of his odorous pipe.

The men from the restaurant began to pour from the door. Side by side stood Laube and Domzalski, and seven shots each spewed from the muzzles of their automatics—seven shots, emptying the weapons. But they were too close to miss, their target too plain. Men sprawled in the street, others thrust forward from behind stumbled over them. Some saved their lives by stumbling out of line; but the bullets struck men behind them.

"Time to go," said Laube. "Let's make tracks!"

"Heavens!" answered Domzalski. "I never thought I'd have this chance again! It helps a little."

Laube knew what he meant. It helped a little to bear the solitude of exile, to which Domzalski and the rest must return.

They turned and ran. As they rounded the corner on the heels of the others, bullets from pistols fired by fresh men pouring out the door smashed into the walls of houses they were passing. Around the corner they broke into full speed, the little man and the big one running swiftly, side by side.

As they ran, they reloaded.

"This way!" cried Domzalski.

Ahead, as they turned again, they could see six running figures. One was a woman. Laube let out another burst of speed. From a side street suddenly darted half a dozen soldiers, who knelt in the street to fire at the backs of the fugitives with rifles.

Laube cursed. If they opened fire on the soldiers, they had an excellent chance of hitting their own friends.

But they raced on. Laube yelled a command at the kneeling soldiers.

The men whirled and turned their guns. Popov and his crowd turned right and vanished. The pistols of Laube and Domzalski flamed, while they slackened their speed not at all.

Up came the rifles. Three men were down.

One more went down, a bullet between his eyes as Laube fired again.

Another fell, but, lying on the ground brought up his rifle, aimed it with glazing eyes and fired. Domzalski leaped high, like a deer shot through the heart and crashed to the ground.

CHAPTER XI.

RETURN OF THE EXILES.

LAUBE paused for a fraction of a second. He turned Domzalski over and examined him. He was dead. Laube whirled back, as the last soldier was aiming his piece. He leaped aside and fired. The soldier's bullet whistled through the place where Laube had been standing, but the soldier himself slid forward to the ground, like a man stretching out to sleep.

Laube, as more soldiers debouched into the street at the sound of firing, sprang to the first door and pounded frantically for admittance. A sleepy voice demanded his name.

"Open," he shouted in Russian, "in the name of the commissar!"

The door opened partially. Then, as the man behind it noted the smallness of the man who had pounded on the

heavy panels, he opened the door wider, and Laube stepped quickly inside.

"Is there another way out of here?" he demanded. "I'm trying to head off a spy believed to have cut through to the next street."

The man sleepily led the way to a back door, and Laube was gone, gripping his swagger stick tightly in his right hand.

He raced along street after street, first turning right, then left, but always bearing in the general direction of the spot where the planes had been left. He paused once to listen. He could hear the savage pounding of his own heart and the rattle of musketry in the darkness ahead. He leaped into a run again. He did not expect any one to return for him.

A rifle cracked as he passed a side street, and his cap shifted oddly on his head, but he did not pause. He reached the outskirts of the town, still running at top speed. The darkness swallowed him. Far ahead he could make out moving figures. Laube could hear the crack of bullets fired by his friends.

THERE must have been half a hundred soldiers on the trail of the White Russians. He wondered if Olga Karnief was running by herself, or if she was carried by Popov. It gave him a heartache to think of Popov and Olga. They were both his friends. He would have done much for Olga, because he loved her—he knew that now. But he would do more for her because Popov loved her—Popov, his friend.

He increased his stride, and the yards and rods dropped swiftly behind him. He was gaining on the pursuers of the White Russians. He wondered if he dared risk firing into them.

As an idea came, he started away at a sharp angle to the right. He could take the pursuers from the flank without endangering his friends.

At the end of five minutes his pistol was out again, fully loaded. As swiftly as he could pull the trigger, Laube fired at the pursuers of his friends. He saw two men fall. Cries of alarm broke from the lips of the others.

A shrill yell from Popov, and those with him dropped to their knees and fired at their pursuers, taking advantage of this diversion created by Laube. Bullets whistled about the ears of Laube, who flung himself flat to the ground, fired once again, rolled swiftly over to the right, fired again.

Bullets smacked into the ground near the spot whence he had first fired. He grinned. He had expected them to fire at the flash of his weapon. But the second flash would show them that he was rolling to the right. He waited after that second shot, calmly reloading. Bullets kicked up the snow off to his right.

He grinned and fired three times as fast as he could pull the trigger. There was a scream of pain. He saw a tall shadow measure its length on the ground. Then he rolled to the right again, and bullets smacked into the snow where he had been.

"I can't always outguess them," he muttered. "They'll lay down a barrage here in a minute."

But he risked holding his position for a couple of seconds. He was peering through the gloom at his friends. Ahead of them, running well, was a single figure—that of a woman. While Popov and the rest paused to fight, Olga was making for the planes.

Laube raised his voice.

"Popov!" he yelled in French. "Keep going! I'll keep 'em back!"

HE realized he had bitten off quite a large morsel, but it seemed the only thing to do. More soldiers were coming on from the town, and there were all too few of the White Russians. Some of them must inevitably go down, and every one lost meant that much more

difficulty on the return. Besides, even off the ground and winging away, the rescuers of Olga Karnief were still not out of the woods—not by a great deal.

This time Laube rolled to the left and calmly reloaded his pistol.

Then, when he saw that his friends had gained a few more precious yards, he leaped to his feet and raced toward them, running across in front of their pursuers. Bullets whistled their anger about his ears, yet by some miracle he was not hit. He started zigzagging. He would slow down and walk a pace or two, then leap full speed into a run—slow down—run again.

Now he could see the exhaust flames of several ships. The props had been spun, and the White Russians were clambering into their planes.

Laube stopped with an oath. The planes were taxiing away—looked as though Popov were not going to wait for him. Then he grinned as he saw the intention of the other. Popov was speeding up the planes, getting the tail skids off, to bring the machine guns into play—and bearing down like devils of doom on the Russian soldiers! If it hadn't been for Olga, Laube would have thought it a great maneuver.

But at any moment the wheels of one of those ships might strike something, nose over and smash itself to bits. The Russians were running at almost flying speed.

LAUBE saw one plane remaining behind. It looked like a two-place from his position. The exhaust flames were plainly visible. He dashed toward the ship. His heart thudded against his ribs as he saw there was no one in the pilot's pit, but that the observer's pit was occupied.

He knew without looking that the observer was Olga Karnief.

He understood then. Popov had not wanted to put Olga in danger again and had taken Laube's plane. Laube clambered into the pilot's pit and gave the ship the gun.

When sufficient speed was attained, Laube came back on the stick and lifted the two-place plane off the snow. He looked back at Olga and grinned. His altimeter now said a thousand feet. Her face was deadly white. But she managed to smile at him. Five more planes were wabbling into the air, and, with a sigh of relief, he cut in toward them and dropped into position at point.

They clung together, those six planes, for it was now so dark that they could easily lose one another. For an hour they deadheaded directly on their course. No enemy ships showed against the sky line, and Laube regarded it as an ominous circumstance. He had heard something of vital import in the restaurant where Olga had sung to her hereditary enemies—that a troop train was being made up for a direct attack on Mukden.

"It's a feint, that attack," said Laube to himself, "to cover an attack of an entirely different nature. Friends of Geda and the commissar will not sit back calmly after the death of that precious pair. No, within a matter of hours, we can look for plenty of trouble in the Basin of the Dead!"

AS they circled over the Basin of the Dead, which was perhaps a quarter of a mile wide, Laube peered over the side. The exiles should hear their motor drone. There should be some signal to guide them in. No light showed not even at the opening of one of the tombs.

Laube swore softly to himself.

Were the exiles afraid that these planes were Red or Chinese? What could be the explanation of the silence in the basin?

Well, he had to find out, and the only way to find out was to go down. Yet as he waggled his wings and his men gave way to right and left to give him room, he felt as though he were flying

into some sort of trap and taking Olga with him. But they couldn't stay up there above the basin all night.

He went down without hesitation and landed. The soft snow dragged his plane to a swift stop.

He cut the gun and spoke to Olga.

"Something wrong, Olga," he said softly. "You'd better come with me."

Without a word Olga clambered from the cockpit and was helped to the ground by Laube. Then, with his swagger stick tight gripped in his right hand and his automatic in his left, he led the way to the nearest cave.

There was a heavy piece of cloth over the door. Laube paused for a long moment before it, listening intently. He put his face close against it and sniffed. The odor of smoke came out but no sound. With a deeply drawn breath, he pulled the cloth aside and leaped inside.

There was a thin glow of fire on the floor of the musty, aged place.

Against the wall to the right, propped up like so many mummies, were the Russian prisoners! It needed no second glance for Laube to see that they were dead. They had been stabbed to death.

SPRAWLED on the floor before the Russians was a stranger, a huge Chinese. He, too, was dead. Half of his head had been blown away by a bullet!

Laube backed toward Olga.

Her face was deadly white, her eyes wide with horror, as she gazed at the dead men. No other sounds could be heard. The five other planes were still aloft, circling, waiting for a signal from Laube.

If there had been danger of attack on landing, he and Olga would long since have felt the brunt of it, unless the mysterious presences he sensed in the basin were waiting for all the flyers to come down.

With Olga's hand on his arm, they quitted the gruesome tomb and hurried back into the basin to Laube's plane. Quickly, one after the other, he lighted three matches. Instantly one of the planes above nosed over and started down. It landed and taxied up close to Laube's ship. Its motor coughed and died. One after another, the other four planes came down and were silent.

Then, for the first time, Laube heard a noise.

A strange, weird tinkling of bells sounded all through the basin!

Laube held his own breath to listen. He had heard bells like those before, but never under such circumstances.

The bells were the bells which Mongols string on the arches over the heads of ponies, which drag their sleds in winter.

Yet in this mountainous country there was no possibility that there could be such sleds, especially in such numbers as the bells would seem to indicate.

"Mongol sleigh bells," he said softly to the others, "but what are they doing here, and why? First it's Chinese, then Reds, then Mongols. I wonder what next."

"Could Mongols pass as Chinese?" queried Popov, in a subdued voice.

"They might, after dark, but they couldn't fool other Chinese, nor could they fool any one who knows either Mongols or Chinese."

"At night, you say, however, they might get away with it?"

"What are you driving at, Popov?"

"Only this. Those bells are the sleigh bells of Mongols. What's to prevent the Reds from enlisting Mongols to attack us here? It would save them the trouble of actually invading Manchuria, with all the attendant complications, national and otherwise."

Laube stiffened.

"If Mongols are being used," he said, "then who knows which side is using them? Lung Hsi Shan might be using them to cover a later charge that he killed foreigners, or he might even be able to blame it on the bandits of this

section of the country. And the Reds might use 'em for the purpose you mention."

Popov did not answer. The only answer which came was a continued tinkling of the bells—never louder, never lower of tone, monotonously the same. In time, such a sound would drive men crazy, send women into hysterics.

LAUBE suddenly raised his voice in a shout to the exiles.

"This is Baron Laube calling! Show a light some one!"

As though by magic, the sound of the bells ceased. But no answer came from the tombs. After a second or two, the bells began again. It was a nerve-racking business. Laube suddenly turned on his heel. "I am afraid I did not look closely enough at the dead Chinese. Let's have another look."

"Oh," exclaimed Olga suddenly, "I can't go back into that dreadful place!"

"Sorry," vetoed Laube, "but you can't stay outside by yourself, when we don't know what's going to happen in this basin. Stick close to Nicholas, and stand just outside the door if you want to."

The small party filed into the cave. Laube bent over the yellow man who sprawled at the feet of the dead Russians. He turned the man over.

"He could easily have fooled me," stated Laube, "and I'm an old hand among these people. This dead man is a Mongol! Now what the devil is coming off?"

The drape which covered the door was suddenly thrust aside and Popov entered with his arm about Olga Karnief. Laube's eyes flickered as he noticed, then his face became expressionless.

"I had to come in, Laube," said Popov softly, "for I saw something that puzzled me, against the opposite wall of the basin."

Laube stiffened.

"Yes?" he said softly. "What?"

"Moving figures—human figures, that jumped along against the white of the snow with the speed of mountain goats."

Laube whistled softly. The lowering of the drapes had almost deadened the sound of the bells.

"If any attack were being planned immediately," Laube said after a moment of thought, "it would have been launched before the planes came back, because even Mongols know how deadly planes with guns can be. Put a guard on the planes, Popov, and then get word to each tomb that holds any of your people to barricade the mouths of their tombs as fast as they can do so. The barricades must be high enough to protect kneeling men against machine-gun fire."

"Then you have an idea?"

"Those bells, besides giving everybody the willies, have quite another purpose," snapped Laube. "Their sound drowns out other sounds, the sounds made by men going into position. But it can be nothing worse than a siege for the time being. Nobody, especially Mongols, would charge across that basin at our people, when our people have a field of fire."

"But precious few arms and a dreadful lack of ammunition," interrupted Popov.

"The enemy," replied Laube, "would not know that. Now, Popov, I want you to stay here and assume command, as soon as you've convinced your friends that we are not Chinese or Reds. The rest of us will be taking off very soon. I wonder how much gas we still have? Enough, do you think?"

"There can't be much," said Popov gloomily.

"Did any of you hear of a troop train crossing the border into Manchuria?" asked Laube.

One of the observers had, and said so. He was the man who had flown

back the ship of the ill-fated Domzalski.

"We're meeting that train," said Laube quietly, "and making sure it doesn't get too far into the Young General's territory. After we've done that, there are certain supplies in Mukden, we must have."

"You mean," gasped Popov, "that you're going right into Mukden?"

"Just that!" said Laube shortly. His shoulders sagged with weariness. There were deep lines of worry about his eyes. He looked at Olga Karnief, still supported by the arm of Popov.

"Olga," he said, smiling—and it was rare that any one saw a smile on the face of the Little Un—"I wonder if you'd change the bandages on me before we get going again?"

He knew it would be a relief to her to have something to think about. Besides, his bandages needed changing.

In the neighboring tomb, which had been turned into a crude hospital, she bent over him. He studied her face hungrily. Her eyes met his, and for a second she stiffened.

"Of what," she said softly, "are you thinking?"

"You," he replied, "wondering if I'd ever see you again, after to-night."

She gasped, and her hands trembled. Laube closed his eyes as her fingers worked swiftly. Behind the lowered lids, he could see a group of planes diving through a hail of lead at a Red troop train. This picture gave place to one he knew better than any other—the arsenal at Mukden—and racks and racks of three-inch Sutton projectiles.

CHAPTER XII.

LEADEN HAIL.

AS Laube lifted out of the basin a few hours before dawn, he realized that he had had practically no sleep for something like seventy hours. He shook his head to clear it of cobwebs.

He looked back into the basin. Now lights were visible—proof that Popov had somehow reassured the mystified exiles. Laube dismissed them from his mind. Popov was capable.

The sun was just above the eastern horizon when Laube and his squadron passed swiftly beyond Harbin and swept down to follow the snaky trace of the rails. They had passed a train of Chinese soldiers, headed out of Mukden. Far ahead Laube could make out the length of another train—and circling lazily above it a score of airplanes. The Reds were coming across the border. The train out of Mukden had been sent to throw them back.

Laube patted his guns and fired a burst, to make sure they were in working order. He glanced right and left to see that his men were doing the same. There were satisfied grins on their faces, but occasionally one of them looked aloft at those circling planes. Six against twenty were great odds.

Laube, as they approached the train, waggled his wings and started his dive. He was wasting no time. The Russians would think this small flight was a Chinese patrol, out to gather information. Laube intended not only to disabuse them of the idea but also to take advantage of their carelessness.

His heart leaped high with hope when he noted that the Reds had commandeered a Chinese train—a train of gondolas, in which the soldiers stood upright.

Laube himself headed straight for the engine cab, coming down at an angle. When he caught the open window of the cab in his cross wires, he took a deep breath and set his guns to clattering.

He thought he saw a man fling up his hands and fall back into the cab, but he did not wait to see. He swept over the train, banked right, came back like a shot, right wing straight down, and hurled burst after burst into the fireman's side of the cab.

He could not see the effect of his fire, but he was sure of one thing: that engine, hauling the Red troops, was smashing along the rails with no guiding hand on the throttle! The engineer and fireman, if not slain outright by those two bursts, had made some sort of break for safety, if only to crawl into their tool boxes. And they would stay there.

LAUBE zoomed. One behind the other, noses tilted down a little, the White Russians were passing along that train, and their guns were spitefully crashing out their shrill staccato of death. Rifles answered them from the gondolas. But they were fleeting targets, and when they had passed over, there were forms hanging half in and half out of the cars—and the train was hammering on toward Mukden.

Laube cast a glance up at the covering planes. Every last one of them had nosed over for the dive.

Then Laube saw the White Russians execute the prettiest and most difficult maneuver he had ever seen. They were flying one behind the other, mere yards from prop to tail.

The leader signaled. Noses went down, spewing lead. Motors yelled shrilly. Noses came up with a rush, and, at a bare three hundred feet from the racing train, five planes were on their backs, and half rolling out, as though they had all been worked by a single string.

Then, with the formerly rearmost man in the lead, they were slashing back along that train, guns spitting again with savage fervor. Laube studied the diving Reds. Would the White Russians make their return trip of the train in time, or would the Reds get them?

Then he grinned. As long as the White Russians were above that troop train, they were safe. The Reds could not fire, unless they callously disregarded the lives of Russian soldiers, quite too many of whom had already paid the penalty of guerrilla warfare.

Laube waved his arm frantically at the White Russians. The leader saw him. Laube swooped close to the ground and let his Boeing out to her best speed. He gasped as he looked over the side. A half mile ahead of the train, was a wrecked box car, directly across the track—and piled under, over, all around it, masses of railroad ties. On all sides of the box car were Chinese soldiers, ready to fire. Laube's heart sang.

The train crashed in. The engine turned over. Three or four cars piled on top of it, then rolled down the embankment. The other cars bowed their backs and spilled out the Ruskies who were still alive.

The Chinese soldiers, in wave after wave, rose from their places and charged.

At the same moment, with a stuttering snarl of bullets, the winged minions of the Soviet crashed down upon the White Russians!

THERE remained but one thing to do. Twenty planes against six was inconceivable. The only thing to do was to run for it.

Laube swept his arm in a comprehensive gesture which said plainly:

"Make for Mukden, and give 'em the gas!"

He dived and took his place at the front of the White Russian formation.

He beckoned his flyers on, then cut swiftly back, guns flaming, to angle across the face of the Russian flight, loosing bullets as fast as his guns could spurt them forth. It wasn't much of an effort, but it did gain for Laube's men a few precious yards. If their gasoline held out, yards meant life—and a chance to perform the mission Laube had in mind.

Bullets riddled his wings, lashed through and through his fuselage as he

cut to the right, spraying lead. Not comprehending the purpose of his mad attack, the Reds hesitated and started to bunch. Then Laube was diving away, nursing his ship to every bit of speed she could manage. He had gained a few yards for his people, which made them just that much harder to hit.

The exiles guessed his purpose and gave their ships all they would take. If a motor so much as faltered now, they were done for, and none would go on if one went down.

BUT the motors bellowed a mad challenge to the sunrise, and the planes held a steady course for Mukden. Laube, angling back in on his flyers, gave a signal to dive. Instantly the noses of the White Russian planes dipped, and Laube himself led the mad plunge toward the ground. When his wheels were about to touch, he leveled off, and with the speed of the dive, together with every possible rev that could be coaxed from the motors, they hedgehopped for Mukden.

The Reds dared not dive upon them, for they would never be able to pull out in time to avoid crashing.

Laube grinned. Harbin was far behind. Mukden would be showing up before long. There he expected to pull off his best coup—and the most difficult. He said to himself that it was impossible, but in a long and checkered career he had done a great many things he had considered impossible.

A lot depended upon what Lung Hsi Shan decided to do.

By now word must have reached Shan that a score of Russian planes were bearing down on Mukden.

Shan would be frantic at the thought of foreigners invading the domain he considered his own. He could be depended upon to send out his entire air force to repel the attack.

About the only thing that mattered, as far as the Young General was concerned, would be whatever planes were shot down.

There ought to be some way of making Shan pay out cash to reimburse Young Chang for those planes! He probably paid, or promised to pay, those Mongols——

Laube whistled into the slip stream as another idea came. If the Mongols cleaned out the basin they would be paid, secretly of course, by Lung Hsi Shan. If they failed, Shan was too good a business man to pay.

"And they'll fail," cried Laube, "and Shan will keep the money—until I have a word or two to say about it!"

Laube looked ahead, and a cheer burst from his lips. Coming on from Mukden was a flight of two dozen or more ships—ships of every kind, decrepit, two-place planes, Vought Corsairs, Boeings.

"And not one of 'em will bother us," thought Laube, "until something is done about the Reds that are still riding our tails!"

There had been a couple of regiments of Chinese around that smashed box car and another regiment or so in the train which had pulled out of Mukden. There were only four regiments in Mukden. That meant that the arsenal was almost deserted.

LAUBE climbed his ship swiftly for thirty or forty feet. Coming straight toward him, down the ribbon of rail along which they were flying, was the Chinese troop train of which he had been thinking.

He looked back and up at the Reds who still had been unable to down a single one of his meager little flight. Would they turn on the Chinese soldiers in the train?

But before he had a chance to find out, Shan's flyers were racing in on the Reds. Laube signaled the White Russians to fly on, and, though he could see disappointment on their faces as they

shook savage fists at the Reds, they obeyed without hesitation.

Laube was going through, and his exiles were obeying him to the letter.

Mukden was showing up now through a steamy haze, which seemed to be rising from the snow. Laube, looking neither to right nor left as he stared at the city, picked out the arsenal.

There was a secret of the arsenal known only to Laube. He grinned as he thought of it.

Waggling his wings to break formation, Laube dived straight down and landed on the old familiar parade, without so much as a preliminary reconnaisance. He taxied swiftly up to the gate which led to the office buildings, stepped from his ship, which he left idling, gripped his swagger stick tightly and strode through the office door.

A CHINESE soldier leaped to attention, snapping Laube a salute. Laube waggled his fingers at him, as though too lazy to bother about a salute. The Chinese scarcely knew whether to run or smile.

"Hello, Mong," said Laube, easily. "How'd you like to be my orderly again?"

"I'd like it, master!"

"Any news about the return of the big master?"

"Yes, he is returning in about two days!"

"Good! I'll be here to meet him. How do the soldiers like Lung Hsi Shan?"

"*Pu hao!*" snapped Mong, which means "no good."

"How are our bombs and mortars?" said Laube next, watching the face of Mong carefully.

"They are all right, master! I tell no one!" Mong grinned.

"However, unless I leave you tied up, your head will be chopped off when General Shan hears. So you'll be tied up, gagged, and maybe even cracked over the head to make it look good!"

One gathered, watching Mong, that a crack or two over the head for his master's sake was a mere bagatelle. But nothing was done until Laube went out and signaled the other flyers.

They landed. Gasoline was quickly poured into tanks. Three-inch projectiles were placed in the racks of the Boeings and piled carefully in the after pits of the two-place jobs.

Satisfied that he had such bombs as he would need, Laube brought out the pride of his heart—six of the three-inch Sutton mortars. The plates were placed flat in the pits, the barrels and bipods strapped on the wings against the fuselage. Laube did not hurry, though any moment they might be interrupted.

They took off with a roar and headed for the basin. As his mind went back to the previous night, Laube fancied he could hear the plaintive, weird, monotonous tinkling of Mongol sleigh bells.

CHAPTER XIII.

BLACK DESTRUCTION!

AS they came within sight of the basin, Laube signaled to break formation and to cut guns.

As the roaring of the motors died away, and only the wind, passing through struts and braces, was audible, sounds of evil portent rocketed up from the basin.

A long line of bearded men were charging across its floor, straight toward the barricaded tombs. The exiles were nowhere to be seen, for machine guns, in the tombs opposite, were spraying their barricades with hails of lead. The Mongols were advancing under a machine-gun barrage, which probably meant that the exiles had used up all their ammunition.

Laube and his flyers, it appeared, were arriving just in the nick of time.

He studied the situation for a moment. He had called these bearded savages Mongols for the benefit of the morale of his Russian friends. But he knew when he saw their beards, stained red, that they were a horde of China's most ferocious bandits—the famous *Hung hu tzu.*

Laube signaled to the man on whose wings none of the Sutton mortars were lashed—ordering him to remain aloft.

Laube meant that none of the *Hung hu tzu* should escape. He grinned as he recalled how, for years and years, for decades even, the Red Beards had practiced banditry throughout Manchuria almost with impunity. Their hide-outs were impregnable, and their name was feared in all the land.

Now, with a single armed flyer aloft, Laube had the Red Beards at his mercy. Lung Hsi Shan, delivering the White Russians into the hands of the Red Beards, had delivered the Red Beards into the hands of Laube!

Motors cut in again, all the flyers, save the one whom Laube had ordered to remain aloft, dived down on that thin line of men which was advancing against the tombs.

The Red Beards scurried back to their hide-outs.

Laube grinned. It was just what he wanted. A score of them fell under the lashing of White Russian steel, before they could get back into their rock chambers. Like rats scurrying to their holes, rabbits to their burrows, the bandits went up the face of the cliffs and disappeared from view.

Without giving them time to marshal wits, Laube signaled his flyers to go down to a landing and himself led the way.

HE knew that, the moment they stopped, machine-gun bullets would make of those ships, loaded with explosives, very unsafe places in which to be. But they must take the chance.

He landed and taxied up even with the opening of the cave where Olga had played nurse to him. As he landed a half dozen exiles, one of them with a useless arm dangling and his clothing covered with blood, raced to the ship. Laube fairly tossed the turnip-shaped projectiles into their arms, and, small as he was, raced to the tomb with the essential parts of the Sutton gun in his arms.

Bullets from across the basin slammed into the walls and ricocheted off the barricade which had been raised at the mouth of the tomb.

Laube looked out, to discover that his plane was almost a wreck. But wreck though it was, a half dozen exiles were dragging it into the shelter of the trees. As fast as the planes landed, Russians dashed out to meet them.

The transfer of mortars and projectiles to the tombs was the fastest job of the kind Laube had ever witnessed. The last of the Russians left alive—four bandits on the snow showed that the Red Beards could use those guns—vanished into the tombs. For a time silence hung over the basin, save for the monotonous droning of the single plane still aloft.

Laube knelt to the task of setting up the Sutton gun in the mouth of the tomb, while bullets from across the way crashed against the rock, and the echoes of machine guns mounted to a deafening rattle in the basin.

He called his flyers about him.

"I'll tell you about this jigger. When you've got instructions down pat, you chaps make a run for it, and get the other mortars set up. When you're ready, get word to me here. Now listen closely. We haven't any time to waste!"

Two men held the projectile, with the snub nose uppermost and the smaller, rear end into the muzzle of the gun.

"Like this," Laube explained eagerly, holding the projectile in position while his audience held their breath. "But,

with two men holding it, there is less likelihood of dropping it. Whatever you do, be sure the small end goes into the muzzle first. When the projectile starts sliding down toward the base of the barrel, its cartridge aimed directly at that nub in the base of the gun—which becomes a firing pin when struck—be sure you're well away from the mortar's muzzle!"

Carefully Laube went over the whole thing twice more.

"Go get the other guns set up," he snapped, "just as I have set up this one. As you get your gun set up, send a man to me to report—a man with a watch! You understand? Now get going."

AS, one by one, they cut from the tomb and raced the bullets from the opposite wall to reach the tombs where other Sutton guns had been taken, Laube squatted on his heels and waited. The rattle of machine guns had mounted to a wild crescendo, and he wondered if all his men had reached their tombs.

Ten minutes passed.

A runner entered the tomb. His face was bloody where a bullet had plowed through his cheek.

"The gun in the next tomb is ready, sir," he reported excitedly.

"Wait!" replied Laube. "Here, set your watch exactly by mine!"

The man complied, wonderingly, and his hands were trembling. He wasn't afraid. It seemed that in crises none of these Ruskies were afraid.

A second man burst in, uninjured, though the machine guns across the way had not paused once. Laube wondered how many White Russians had been killed in the first wild bursts.

Fifteen minutes after the men had left to assemble their Sutton guns, their reports were in.

Their watches had been synchronized to the second. Laube looked at his own.

"You will leave me one minute apart, beginning in thirty seconds from now," he said quickly. "Tell the crews of the guns to aim their muzzles at the nearest tomb opposite from which the bullets are coming. Get through, whatever you do, though this time the gunners opposite will be watching for you! It is now ten minutes after three. At twenty minutes after, exactly, the men holding the projectiles will allow them to slide down the muzzles of the guns—and then we'll see what happens!"

The men nodded, grimly smiling. One by one, at one minute intervals, they swept through the door and out. Laube was acting as his own crew, but he knew exactly what he was doing. When there still were two minutes to go, he stared at one of the tombs opposite upon which he had already aligned his Sutton gun. He could see a machine gun there, bucking and chattering on its tripod.

He looked at his watch. Then, with thirty seconds to go, he held the projectile over the muzzle of the gun, with the small end tilted to slip into the barrel. Twenty seconds to go—fifteen—ten—five—three—one!

The minute hand pointed exactly to the twenty-minute mark when Laube released his projectile. It slid down the muzzle of the gun.

Less than a second and it would strike!

Laube stepped back and his teeth were exposed. All along the line of tombs, other projectiles were dropping down to contact with those invisible firing pins, and their crews were holding their breath, waiting.

"Fung!" said the Sutton gun, with a sound like an asthmatic giant.

Laube stepped boldly to the door of the tomb, whose drape had been tossed back far enough to allow the bomb to fly free. Regardless of the bullets which smashed against the wall all about him, he watched that grim projectile go awkwardly whirling across the fifteen hundred meters to the tomb in the

face of the wall opposite. It spiraled, looking oddly like a punted football, and, keeping pace with it on the deadly journey, went five other projectiles just like it.

THEN the whole Basin of the Dead seemed to shiver and shake, as though a volcanic monster in the bowels of the earth had suddenly wakened and was eager to free himself, shaking the earth with his struggles. For a second the wall opposite seemed merely a mass of lifting débris, as the bombs smashed into the solid rock.

Through the wall of débris, which was just beginning to sink back, dashed scores and hundreds of screaming figures. The Red Beards, yelling at the top of their lungs, were breaking from cover, throwing their arms in all directions, racing like maniacs from the deadly destruction which had struck in their midst. Laube did not even hazard a guess at the number which had fallen.

The roaring of monsters, such as the Red Beards had never experienced before, turned their hearts to water. They raced in all directions from the spot whence they had been firing their machine guns—a spot which had become a place of deadly menace.

"No Red Beard," said Laube softly, "will ever again return to this place!"

Wildly, the Red Beards raced across the floor of the basin. Some were running straight toward the tombs of the exiles; some were trying to climb the walls in which their tombs were hewn; some ran toward one end, some toward the other.

Laube stepped boldly from the tomb. The flyer whom he had left aloft was diving, and his guns were roaring madly. The shrieks of the Red Beards mounted to the sky, drowning out the still sounding echoes of the six mighty explosions.

The flyer was doing his duty. No bullets struck the Red Beards, though they slashed into the snow so close ahead of those who raced to safety that the bandits knew they could be killed at the whim of the flyer. In a minute he had them all milling, as he circled about them, hemming them in with an invisible wall of leaden hail.

They gathered at last in a vast crowd, almost in the center of the basin, while the flyer circled and kept his guns going to see that they remained where they were. They understood the mute command without the slightest difficulty.

LAUBE raised his voice slightly and shouted across to the frightened *Hung hu tzu.*

"Will you surrender yourselves without firing another shot, or shall I signal the flyer above you to shoot to kill?"

Instantly came screams of entreaty, vows of abject allegiance to any one and every one who would let them live. Laube called again!

"Is there any one with any of the guns in the tombs?"

It seemed there wasn't a soul.

"My men are coming to bind you all," he called, "and I have one of those black bombs to drop right into the middle of you if you put up any resistance. Will you submit?"

They would.

"All right, men!" cried Laube. Out of the tombs to the right of Laube raced a score of the exiles, carrying ropes, pieces of cloth—anything that could be used as bonds to hold the bandits prisoners.

When they were all securely bound, Laube strode down among them. Some had real beards, some wore huge false beards. All were stained the villainous red which had given the *Hung hu tzu* their grim name.

"Who paid you to kill these foreigners?" demanded Laube.

A score of voices answered him:

"The big master at Mukden—Lung Hsi Shan!"

Laube whirled and barked a command at Popov.

"Start them immediately, under stout guard, for Mukden. I am going to sell them to Lung Hsi Shan! The outfit must arrive at the home of the Young General at exactly ten o'clock day after to-morrow morning—not earlier, not later!"

In an hour the Basin of the Dead was empty of Red Beards. There remained no sign of them save the trail through the snow leading outward—and the trail showed many drops of crimson.

Laube did not look at the tombs from which his brief bombardment had routed the enemy. He was watching the sky toward Mukden. If Shan won that air fight, the thing was finished until the return of the Young General. If the Russians won, they would bring vengeance to the White Russians who had beaten them. Serge Geda had surely told others of the location of the Basin of the Dead.

Just before dark, the roaring of motors sounded from toward Mukden, the planes themselves still hidden by the mountains.

"Into the planes," said Laube. "Your dearest friends are coming for an accounting!"

He knew by the sounds that the ships which came were from beyond the border—and that the forthcoming fight would be a fight to the death.

CHAPTER XIV.

RETRIBUTION.

OLGA KARNIEF came out and touched the shoulder of Baron Laube.

"So many thanks," she said, with a catch in her voice, "for everything."

Laube, because he could not trust himself to speak, said nothing. But his eyes spoke for him, and, being a woman, she could read those eyes. For a long moment she studied them. Then she was beside Popov. Just before he clambered into the plane which might take him to his death, she kissed him.

"Well," thought Laube, "I've always maintained that the service man could have but one mistress—his military career—no wife but the army he serves. I'm still right, and it's just as well. I would look odd, dancing with Olga."

But his eyes, now that she was not looking his way, were very wistful. Then he glanced at Popov.

"He must come out of the fight alive," he said to himself, "and it's up to the Little Un to see that he does. I'm beginning to like that nickname. It's better than Baron!"

The roaring of the oncoming motors was louder. Laube estimated that there were perhaps twelve planes.

"All right, men!" he snapped. "Let's take 'em off!"

They warmed their motors for a short time and took off wildly, pawing for altitude with thrashing propellers. Guns were tripped to make sure that everything was in readiness.

Then Laube signaled for formation flight to the front, and the six planes, with grim-faced men at the sticks, roared on to meet the unknown menace ahead. Laube did not so much as look back. He knew that Olga was standing back there, waving, but it didn't matter so much, after all.

Then, out of the gathering darkness ahead, loomed the outlines of the planes. Laube saw instantly that Shan's flyers, while they had lost to the Russians, had given a fairly good account of themselves. He signaled to break formation, and without waiting to see his signal obeyed, he went into the thick of the Red formation like a thunderbolt.

HIS guns flamed, barking staccato fury into the faces of the Reds. In the first minutes of the engagement he sent a two-place Red plane down in flames. The orange tongues lighted up the

darkening sky on all sides as it roared down. It exploded in mid-air as its gas tanks let go, and Laube, who had seen planes fall before, took advantage of the fact that the Reds must be watching the falling plane in horror. He almost brushed his prop against the belly of a second plane as he let go another burst.

The other planes faltered, dropped a wing down and started corkscrewing for the white earth below. Laube in two minutes, with nothing in his mind but sky combat, had accounted for two of the enemy. If the others did as well, the fight would soon be over. Then he glanced around, seeking Popov.

The prince's ship was slicing in on a Russian two-place plane, and already red tongues of flame were playing back over pilot and observer, attesting to the deadly effect of Popov's fire. Laube grinned and circled tightly, to note whether any other of the White Russians needed his assistance.

One man did, but Laube was too late to help him. The man had just sent a Red down to a sure crash landing—but he had lost his own propeller in the interchange. He was going down, but there was a Red ship under him. He took it down with him, his engines buried halfway through the fuselage.

The White Russian waved at Laube and deliberately folded his arms over his chest as the two ships, lovingly intertwined, rolled down and down to the mountainside.

"And that's a man's way to die," muttered Laube.

The White Russians were taking out on the Reds the bitterness of their years of exile—paying them for memories of horrors they had witnessed in the Red deluge.

Ten minutes after the battle had begun, the Reds turned tail for the border and Progranichnaya—and three planes banked about to return to the basin where the exiles lived. Laube waved them on. He noted that one of the flyers was Popov.

Laube raised his hands high so that the Whites could see them and shook them—it was the Chinese gesture of good-by.

IT was ten o'clock in the morning, and the Young General had returned. In his own quarters he was facing Lung Hsi Shan.

"So, my good general," the Young General was softly saying, "you failed to have my four Mukden regiments destroyed, as you intended. They utterly routed the Russians this side of Harbin, or was it the other side?"

"I did what I was sure you would have done had you been here," maintained Lung Hsi Shan uncomfortably.

"And where is Laube? He is my representative when I am gone, especially when I am in conference with your superiors at Nanking."

"He persuaded a group of White Russians from somewhere in the mountains to help him steal most of the airplanes attached to the arsenal——"

"But how could he have taken them all? And why did he leave you? It isn't like Laube to desert in time of need. He is faithful to me. It appears that, since you came here to reform my mode of government, you have cost me a great number of men and have caused the destruction of all my planes. They total something like three hundred thousand dollars in value."

"The fault is Laube's," snapped Lung Hsi Shan, "and if he were here I would prove it before his face. He should face a firing squad!"

"Well, my dear general," said a drawling voice from the door, "Baron Laube—if you please—is right here! What was it you were saying? About firing squads? Or was it about beheading knives?"

Lung Hsi Shan's face was livid as he faced the diminutive Laube, who

strode nonchalantly forward and took the hand of the smiling Young General.

"You—you—traitor——" he began.

Laube raised his hand.

"Before you say anything that may be used against you," he said softly, "perhaps you might care to look into the street outside this house?"

Shan fairly ran for the door outside which a squad of soldiers with bared bayonets was standing. They looked up and stiffened as Lung Hsi Shan reached the threshold. Shan turned back.

"You were saying?" Laube said coldly, striking his leg with his swagger stick.

But Shan, it seemed, was saying nothing. How could he, when he had just seen the street before the house packed from side to side with red-beard bandits, guarded by a dozen White Russians? He knew that the Red Beards had probably talked.

Laube grinned at him, but the grin was cold as ice. Even generals may feel the edge of the beheading knife in revolutionary China.

Shan stiffened and said nothing.

"Am I right in understanding that you have offered, out of your private fortune, General Shan," said Laube softly, "to supply the Young General with new Vought Corsairs in place of the Boeings that were destroyed?"

BLANK dismay spread over the face of Shan—but this was better than the business end of the executioner's knife. He gulped and nodded. When he got back to Nanking, he could laugh at Laube and the Young General. They could whistle for their Vought Corsairs.

"I understand, too," continued Laube, "that, until we have taken delivery of the Vought Corsairs, you will personally supervise—aided and advised by certain White Russians—the rebuilding of the little village of Nevsky."

So he was to be held in the mountains, where none would know his whereabouts, until he had paid. Still, even that was better than the knife.

He nodded.

"The Red Beards," went on Laube, "will do the actual labor. They will understand your wishes, my dear general. And the Russians have certain machine guns——"

But Shan hastily broke in.

"I shall be pleased to do what I can."

Laube grinned. Shan was touchy about those machine guns.

"Who knows?" grinned Laube. "The Red Beards may turn honest before Nevsky is restored—if you set them a good example!" Later, alone with the Young General, Laube and that young gentleman shook hands again, and seemed immensely pleased with the state of things.

At ten thirty Laube strode through the gate of the arsenal, headed for his office, to instruct Captain Usami to continue the work of construction on the buildings Laube had started. As he passed through the gate, the sentries gave him the military salute.

Laube, smoke mounting from the evil-smelling bowl of his corncob pipe, waggled his fingers at the sentries, his thumb hooked in his side pocket.

He had merely done a day's work. He had flown out—and now he was back again.

And back in the hills, at least two people whom he could name were happy.

Dumb Crutch

By Cole Richards

A dumb Airedale teaches some smart Federal agents a few tricks in crook-catching.

JOE MAHON knew there was going to be a fight the instant his Airedale spied the white bull terrier, sitting beside Gertz in the roadster. It was prophetic that the Airedale's stubby tail and bristling ruff were on a line with Gertz's mountain. Joe had had a job on that mountain. As the Airedale plunged for the bull terrier, its sheer cliffs, the light green of its aspens and the darker green of the pines seemed to recede into the warm, blue haze of morning. The white dog jumped from the roadster, meeting him more than halfway.

"Hey, yuh, dumb crutch!" Joe yelled. His voice was lost in the uproar.

They plunged into the battle headlong, teeth bared, growling deep in their throats. The Airedale fought in slashing snaps. He tried to get at the other's foreleg. In and out he leaped, now stiff-legged, now supple as a swordsman. The terrier lunged for the neck each time, red jaws open. If ever those jaws closed on a throat, they stayed.

The Airedale had fought dogs of that breed before. Each time he darted in, he leaped out at a different angle. Both dogs were rapid fighters. In half a minute their maneuvering kicked up a cloud of dust; both bled from small wounds; and the racket of their barks and snarls had brought every person in the village into the road. Goaded by the pain, the terrier rushed.

The jump brought his foreleg in front of slashing jaws. He was whipped from his feet and flung bodily into the dust. After that they were a tumbling, yipping, chewing mess, now with the smooth, white hair in the dirt, now the brown and black curls. Teeth cut deep and blood splattered both of them.

Joe had only a light fish rod in his hand. He jumped a low, stone fence and seized a stick from a pile of firewood. He got to the dogs just as Gertz came out of the roadster, brandishing a heavy cane, his eyes glaring. The terrier was on top. Gertz waited until the Airedale was on top again. He brought the cane down so hard it whined. The Airedale yelped as the cane hit his back, but it was a muffled yelp. His mouth was full of terrier, and his back must be broken to break his hold.

"Lay off that dog. Why didn't you hit the other?" Joe demanded.

GERTZ did not answer. A line of froth appeared at his lips and the cane smashed down again. That blow would have broken the dog's back, had not Joe caught it on the stick. The force of the hit wrenched his wrist. Gertz's eyes went blank in amazement, then he turned his fury on Joe. For a furious moment, cane and stick added a clacking to the noise of fighting dogs.

Gertz could have beaten Joe down, had not some one thrown a bucket of water on the dogs. The cold splash of it struck the two men, wetting their ankles and leaving mud spots in the dust on their shoes. A sudden quiet fell. The spectators moved in, hopefully.

They looked at Gertz, heavy-set, blue-chinned, with a pursed, domineering mouth. He leaned on the cane, wiping his lip with a long forefinger. The rage gave way to self-control that was as dangerous as a leveled gun. A flicker of surprise in the steel of his eyes told how seldom such rages struck him. The level steel of him explained why he lived on his mountain in comparative peace, though a dozen jail cells yawned for him.

Joe turned the stick of wood over in his hand, looked at it and tossed it away. He was a lithe youth in worn, khaki trousers and elk-hide shoes. His tanned hands, one seared by a trap, were wiry. His mouth was tight, his eyes lined by wind and sun. His were the light, quick movements of a man who pits his mind against animals in high altitudes. Joe trapped all up and down the Colorado peaks.

He broke the silence with a clipped but courteous:

"Well?"

Gertz looked down at the bull terrier, crouching beside him. The terrier whimpered, nosing his slashed forelegs, and pawing a ragged ear. Then he looked at the Airedale. He stood off, asking neither quarter nor sympathy. His ruff still bristled. He licked a wound on his leg and on his side, accompanying the licking with snorts and warning growls.

"I want that dog killed," said Gertz, in a tone that matched the level steel of his eyes.

Joe moved over in front of the Airedale. "Aw, he's a dumb crutch," he said apologetically. "Somebody dumped him outa their car. He never fell. They throwed him. Dumpin' him, they busted his leg. I fixed him up. Like I said, he's a dumb crutch." The apology was over suddenly. He added crisply: "But he ain't gonna be killed."

GERTZ'S domineering mouth tugged down at one side in a smile. His fists slowly went to rest on his hips, in a motion that might easily have veiled a quick snatch for a gun. Joe's muscles tightened, ready to jump Gertz should the gun show. At the gunman's motion, Crutch stood up. A reader of men, was Crutch. He knew what a man thought.

"Anything dumb," said Gertz, evenly, "should be got rid of."

"Crutch," replied Joe, his voice equally even, "is dumb in this way—he'd fight anythin'. An' he don't know when he's licked."

"I hired you as a guide and to keep trespassers off my mountain," said

Gertz. "When a man works for me, he follows orders. Shoot the dog."

"The terrier ain't much hurt——" Joe began.

A villager piped up. "He's hurt worse'n seems, Joe. That Crutch, he c'n fight. I bet that terrier's bleedin' inside."

Joe brushed flat palms together. "Then I've quit my job." There was a tremor in his voice, a tremor he could not help. Gertz had offered him three hundred a month to keep off trespassers. It meant better traps, a new gun, a Denver school for the kid sister. He could throw that over now, or shoot the dog—the dumb crutch.

"I was goin' to bring Crutch with me. You lost a good watchdog there."

"I can stand the loss," was the icy reply. He loaded the terrier into the roadster and climbed in at the wheel. "You can have the job if you get rid of the dog. Well?" Domineering mouth and level eyes met controlled mouth and narrowed eyes. Gertz snorted. "Well! The dog's not the only dumb crutch."

He was gone in a roar and clouds of dust.

Joe snapped his fingers at Crutch and walked up the road toward the creek. The dog limped after. The villagers watched him, spat in the dust and went back to the store, shaking their heads. Too bad Joe had to lose the job—but a good dog was a good dog.

Joe got as far as the wooden bridge over the creek, when a voice under the bridge said cautiously:

"You. Joe Mahon! Lean on the railin' like you was lookin' in the water."

Joe leaned. Under the bridge reclined a bright-eyed young man. He leaned on his elbows, thumbs in his pockets and gray hat tilted back on his head. "My name's Jones. There's things goin' on up at the Gertz rancho that I'd like to know about. I'll take care of your pooch. Tell Gertz you shot him. D'you think we can arrange a deal?"

Joe restrained an impulse to vault over the railing and throw the fellow in the water. The mountains had taught him patience. He pulled off a splinter and breaking it into bits, replied, "I've got no grudge. My dog won."

The other grinned. "Straight from the shoulder, and I had it comin'. I know you ain't a two-timer or you'd shot the dog. Can you see this from there?" From his vest pocket he drew a shield. Joe read it and nodded in solemn respect. The other went on. "It's Uncle Sam wants to know, boy. Here's Gertz, underworld baron—bootlegger—dope runner, wholesale only—partner in a little business that lets his friends win on the ponies all the way from New Orleans to Agua Caliente. More recently, he's took up credits an' collections."

"Credits an'——"

"Yeh. Business houses he picks out can credit him with a bonus or they collect a bomb." He exchanged grins with Joe. "Know how many times that house on the mountain has been raided?"

"Three or more. They even moved boulders. Say, some of them big rocks has been there since the mountain was made. That mountain is big. There's a cave up there I know of, a bear's hibernatin' in."

"Uh-huh. An' the raiders found nothin'. No booze, no dope, no letters, no ladies—nothin' incriminatin'. Now Gertz steps out and buys a pack of bear dogs. Bear dogs, I guess you know, is tough babies."

"This pack is," Joe agreed. "Not a pure-bred in 'em. They was all sired by the devil. I've seen 'em tear a strange dog to pieces—scrappers."

"Gertz bought 'em for a reason. He bought 'em to guard somethin' he's never had up there before. Will you leave your pooch with me and lend us a hand?"

JOE brushed flat palms together. "I'll do it for Uncle. But, mark me, Gertz is like them hounds he bought. He likes to kill and he'll go down fightin'." He fingered the Airedale's silky ear. "Don't let my dog get away. No tellin' what he'd do. He's a dumb crutch."

When Joe Mahon reported to Gertz in the big log cabin that he had killed the dog, Gertz's heavy lip pulled down in a wry smile. He had expected it. Let a man think he's going to lose money, and he comes to time. His domineering manner was tinged with contempt as he gave orders to Joe, together with a .45 automatic. The orders were to keep inquisitive visitors away from the mountain. Joe was to wander over the mountain, ask one question of suspicious persons and then shoot. That one question was a password, changed every day.

"And if you shoot while you're workin' for me, you don't have to be afraid of consequences," he said levelly.

Joe felt the steel of those eyes like a knife at this throat. There were never any consequences, as far as Gertz was concerned. Men he could not buy, he killed. Men who entered his employ could expect to be killed. Gertz alone was safe from himself.

Joe walked his beat circumspectly. The first few days he worked in the daytime, then he was changed to night. Two or three times a night he challenged or was challenged by other men, prowling in the dark through pines and aspens and big piles of rock.

The bear pack was kept in a kennel. At first they were given a two-hour run each night, and he could hear them barking far off in the wood. Once, he knew by the shrill yipping that they had treed something. There had been a time when the sound would have set him trembling with excitement. Now it turned him strangely cold. For they were devils—those dogs.

"Tie 'em up and cut down their feed, and they'll do the same to a man. Gertz don't even fish. It ain't likely he's keepin' them for huntin'."

From that night on, the dogs were kept kenneled.

His method of communicating with Jones, the Federal man, was to toss stones from the cliff's edge, if he noted anything unusual. In the valley below was a cabin. The owner apparently was a good fisherman. He hung his trout outside each dawn. For a week, they were the same number. One dawning he caught seven. That was the signal to be on sharper guard. In the night just passed, the dogs again had not run. Joe threw the stones from the cliff.

He walked back to the house. Looking up suddenly, he saw Gertz standing with folded arms in a side window. His level, steely gaze met Joe's eyes without sign of recognition. When Joe looked again, he was gone.

Joe walked toward the rear. "Queer duck," he commented as to himself. "Wonder what he was lookin' at? Nothin', more'n likely. Just starin'. I wonder what he's gettin' ready to pull? He ain't sure of hisself. He ain't sleepin' well."

ABRUPTLY he stopped and slid into the trees, with his heart a hard stone in his throat. Directly in front of him sat Crutch, braced on stiff forelegs, head tilted to the side. Once, he changed position and his tongue showed pink. He panted in expectation, watching the log house. He was waiting for Joe.

Joe bent swiftly, snatched up a rock and hurled it. It knocked Crutch to his feet. He looked around uncertainly. Two more thumps in quick succession set him running with his tail down. Nothing was said on either side. Out of reach of the stones, the dog stopped. Joe remained hidden in the pines. Crutch debated the matter, then trotted

disconsolately down the mountainside. Joe's conscience twinged hard.

"I hadda do it," he muttered. "You lost me my job once, you dumb crutch. This time, it'd put both of us on the spot. Things is just mixed enough here so they won't stand no tamperin'. I wonder could Gertz see him from that window?"

Evidently Gertz had not seen him, for he did not come out. Between the warning signal or seven fish, the whining bear pack and the appearance of Crutch, Joe got little rest that day. He was up and making his rounds, long before a full moon flooded the valleys and the open spots between the trees. Moonlight would make it hard on trespassers. Joe, remembering the seven fish, put extra clips in his pockets. He tried out the automatic against a tree. There was something comforting in the hard thud of bullets into wood.

He kept steadily to his beat—past the cave with its mouth guarded by jutting rocks, the passage between them so narrow a man could barely squeeze through. Then there came pines again, aspens, boulders. The house was a dim bulk with a light in an upper window. He came to a halt there, looking into the sky.

"Thought I heard a plane. It was, too—flyin' low. Must be a forced landin'. Hope he don't miss it." Down the valley was an emergency landing field in a mountain meadow. Joe hoped the pilot knew his business. Once he had searched for a plane that overran the landing field. It had been hard to find. He stood still, listening to the steady drone. Evidently it landed, for the drone died quietly away without a crash.

He started off, stopped again. In place of the drone, ran the throb of an auto. And it was coming up the winding drive to Gertz's mountain.

"Wonder where I oughta meet it? I'm goin' to stay here."

THE window just above him was open. The drive and front steps were in full moonlight. He crouched tight to the log wall, as a man came to the window and leaned out. It was Gertz. Joe stopped breathing. Then Gertz was gone and the motor purred up to the front.

A man got out, carrying a long, clumsy bundle. Gertz met him. A mutter of words followed. They went in. A sudden wind slammed the door. Back in the kennels, the bear pack set up a racket, easing down until only one barked at intervals. Otherwise the night was ominously quiet.

Joe stayed by the window, one hand on the rough bark of a log. He knew that the thing in the bundle was the thing the bear pack were there to guard. And it was the thing that caused the seven fish to dangle on a line in the dawn.

"I dunno if to go after Jones, or stay an' see what happens. If I knew where Gertz went——"

Then the two men went past the window. Joe promptly hooked his fingers over the sill and climbed the logs. He slid quietly through into an empty hall, lit by a single bulb at the far end. The two men were passing under the bulb. They turned into a stair going down. Joe followed. A cool draft through the hall and a squeaking told him the wind had blown the front door open again.

At the bottom of the stair was a door. With his automatic elbow high, his left hand turned the knob so slowly he was hardly aware it moved. When a crack showed, he saw two packing boxes, a little way out from the wall. He slid from the door behind the boxes. From there, he could see Gertz and the other man, a bent, skinny fellow in sagging clothes.

They had put the bundle on the floor and unwrapped it. On the dirty comforter lay a little girl of three, with

brown curls against a face oddly white. Joe wondered why she slept so soundly.

"You shouldn't do that," said Gertz irritably.

"Why not? Only enough to make her sleep. Won't hurt."

"I don't like this business," Gertz persisted, and for once his voice was not level. "It's not worth the risk."

"Not worth it! When you only spent two grand and her old man's good for a hundred? Kids is valuable. They ain't no game like it."

Joe had his gun on the fellow and his finger on the trigger that instant. The kidnaper stood in the gates of death, but they closed again and left him outside. For Joe lowered the gun. Nothing was to be gained by disturbing the men upstairs, or some watcher who might be too near the house. Here was the evidence Jones wanted. The thing to do was to summon him, and let practiced raiders go through the house.

HE crouched for a quick slide through the door—then halted with bated breath as the door swung abruptly open. Joe knew that moment how it feels to get a knock-out blow on the jaw. His sight blurred. He was stunned. In his hand was a gun and he had no strength to use it. Through the pounding in his temples, he heard the steel click in Gertz's voice as he reached for his gun.

"So he wasn't dead! He will be this time."

In the door stood the Airedale. For this Joe had given up a good job—had stoned the dog away at risk of Gertz seeing him.

The dog's ears had been perked up, his tail wagging. The tail wag stopped. He stood with partly opened mouth, eyes on Gertz. Crutch knew what the gunman was going to do, but he did not flinch.

Abruptly Joe came to life. He grabbed Crutch by the neck and jerked him behind the box. In the same motion he drew down on Gertz.

"Put 'em up," he rapped. "You ain't killin' my dog, Gertz. Put that gun down on the floor. Kick it this way." The gun came spinning along the floor. He pocketed it. "Now, you little runt, back up here." Another gun weighted his pocket. "One of you bring the kid here. And watch your step." He glared at Gertz.

Gertz and the other exchanged bitter looks. The little man brought the baby over, and at Joe's direction laid her on the floor. He backed away slowly, eyes intent on Joe. Gertz remained unmoved, but his muscles tightened and his mouth got thick and ugly.

As Joe bent to pick her up, both men jumped for him. They came up short in the face of a crouched gunman. The Airedale bristled at his side. They held that pose—threatening on one side, defiant on the other—until Joe broke it by a step backward. Gertz did not move, but he glanced at the ceiling. Joe knew what thought lay behind that look. There were men upstairs and at least two out on the grounds.

He did some quick thinking then. If these men knew he was going to Jones, they would simply escape. He wanted them to stay on the grounds and that they would do, if they thought he had hijacked them.

"I c'n use a hundred grand myself. Thanks for your help, Mr. Gertz."

"You're not out of here yet," said Gertz, and again the level steel was like a knife at Joe's throat.

He maneuvered the dog out, whisked the key to the outside and locked the door. A moment later he pushed the dog out the window and slid out himself, holding the baby like a stiff little doll. The night was silent except for a wind running in the trees.

The Airedale bounced around his feet. Joe shoved him away roughly.

"You done enough damage, you

dumb crutch!" he whispered. "Git fer home!"

Crutch slunk into the shadows. Joe heard a hammering in the cellar and struck off into the pines. He headed for a stone stair that ran steep and direct to the foot of the mountain. Many a time he had trapped or had followed the tortuous trail of a fugitive animal. Now it was his turn to dodge and mislead. The hammering at the house stopped and there came the clatter of men running. In his arms, the baby squirmed and whimpered. If she started to yell, thought Joe, it was all off. He headed for a high boulder, intending to put it as a sound breaker between them and the house. As he got there, a man stepped out, rifle in hand.

"Where you goin' with the kid?"

JOE was holding the gun elbow high. In one swift movement, he swung it shoulder-high and rapped a hard blow to the jaw with the muzzle. The man sank down. The rifle dropped and, striking a stone, went off. The roar of it shattered the night.

"An' I was tryin' not to make a noise!"

He darted off to the left. He would have to cross a streak of moonlight, but it was the quickest way to the stair. Just then a man stood up on another boulder, peering down at the lighted place. Joe got a tighter hold on the baby, whirled and ran the other way into the trees.

That way led to a precipice, and he intended doubling back until he came to the down trail. Something, dark and heavy, sprang up against his leg, almost tripping him. He threw an arm around an aspen and kept his balance without letting the baby fall. A shrill cry escaped her. Behind him, he heard yells of "There he goes!" The dark thing that had tripped him jumped at his knee. He kicked at it but it only circled and came back.

"You're goin' to get me into trouble yet, yuh dumb crutch!"

It was almost a sob. Even had he been alone, he was in a tight place—but with a three-year-old baby girl, and bullets!

At that moment he skirted a boulder, thinking the trees were thick on the other side. Instead he ran into a moonlit stretch, glaring like a spotlight. A rifle cracked and a .45 rattled out its clip like a miniature machine gun. The Airedale raced on across the moonlit stretch. Joe pivoted on one toe and jumped back into the shadow.

The bullets tossed up dirt and pine needles around the dog. Just as he went into the shadows on the opposite side, he emitted a sharp, "Yipe!" But when he saw that Joe was not with him, he turned and came back across the open space. That time only the rifle spoke. The bullet whined far over, but Crutch jumped like a dog who has been kicked more than once in the same place.

He caught up with Joe and trotted beside, looking up at him.

"You common yella cur," Joe thought, "you're scared yella."

The baby drew in her breath for a long yell, and Joe put his hand over her mouth. It was not easy, holding her mouth and a .45 at the same time. He skulked through the pines, intending to try again for the stone stair.

He had gone but a few steps, when he saw a shadow detach itself from the trees and glide down the stair. They were everywhere. Gertz had not hired a plane and brought a kidnaped youngster that far to let a trapper get away with her. He had sunk two thousand dollars in that venture, and he meant to get something out of it.

THEY had Joe cut off now from all but one way of escape. Above the cave rose a rock, which guarded a steep trail down the cliff. It was his only chance.

"How I'll make it with the kid, I dunno. But I'll make it."

He got to the big rock, casting a longing glance at the cave under it. The high rock was sharp in the moonlight. The cave lay in the shadow. It was almost inaccessible, with the rocks close about the entrance. But to go in there was to invite starvation. It was the cliff or nothing.

Crutch clung to his heels, as though he knew they were cornered. When Joe looked down at him, Crutch looked up with a wide, frightened expression and glanced uncomfortably to each side. Once a rifle cracked. Crutch crouched against Joe's leg.

"He's goin' to have to stay here," thought Joe, "I can't get him down, too. Mebbe he'll know better next time—if there is a next time, the dumb crutch."

Joe cowered only an instant from the moonlight on the rock. Holding the baby close, he crept over the rocks flanking the cave entrance. He reached the big boulder and faced a five-foot band of light. His hand traveled up, feeling for a hold, only to jerk down as a gun cracked. A bullet ricocheted off the rock where his hand had been.

He set his teeth, locked his hand in a hole and prepared to pull himself up for a quick run over the rock. A volley of shots crackled out. He let go and dropped to the rocks below. Had he stayed, he would have been riddled. He saw a dark figure moving in the shadows and fired at it. An answering slug whined into the recesses of the cave beneath. Joe crept around to the front of the cave, with an idea of trying for the rock from the other side. His hand, tight over the baby's mouth, smothered her cries to muffled sobs. His own breath rasped in his throat, and he was icy cold. He could have understood Gertz killing a man without compunction. It horrified him to think they would rather see the tiny girl killed than let some one else have the reward.

He got in front of the entrance and started up the nearest rock. Then it was that the guns poured such a storm of lead at him that he had to drop and squeeze through into the cave. Above him, the slugs rattled on the rock in a hail, screeching off it at all angles. He ran into the cave and put the baby down in a crevice shielding her from three sides. She was screaming at the top of her lungs. Her screams were lost in the crash of firing.

Joe went out to the narrow passage and slid down behind a rock to fire. He judged at least half a dozen men were in the trees, judging from the rapidity with which guns flashed in different spots. They kept up a constant rattle of bullets against the rocks. Some whined through, to drop far back in the cave. It was the ones ricocheting off the rocks at the side that were dangerous. One man fired at an angle, trying to hit the inside of the rock and drill Joe.

Joe fired at the flashes, trying to snap a shot back fast enough to nail a man. He counted his shots, for he had none to waste. One after another went and still he could count six guns, as each burst blazed red in the darkness. Suddenly, out of the uproar of the firing, one bullet sung like an angry hornet. He dodged, too late. It sliced hot across his shoulder, which began to stiffen and burn. Other slugs, coming in quick succession, kept him down behind the rock. The besiegers had located him. They fired in succession, keeping him constantly in danger. Sweat poured into his eyes. He wiped it away, cracked a shot at a shadow—and took a slug in the arm.

THE gun dropped from his hand. He felt around for it and grasped it with his left hand. He put it between his knees to change the clip. His breath came in hoarse gasps. His mind felt battered, as though every bullet banging the rocks had thumped against his head.

The night whirled, so that the gun flashes ran together like a pinwheel.

Still holding the gun with his knees, he felt for more clips. His mind went cold and clear. His last clip was in the gun.

"Wonder how long me an' Crutch can stand 'em off, hand to hand?"

For the first time, he missed the dog. He called him, "Crutch!" And louder, "Crutch!" The incoming bullets did not strike as rapidly as they had. Now and then he got a chance for a shot. He knew why the guns had quieted, firing only at intervals. They were preparing to rush. He had, at most, three shots left.

He went back into the cave and called again. "Crutch!" Echo taunted him by howling the name back. "Crutch!" Just then the firing stopped, and there was a sound of running feet. He whirled, stumbled back to the narrow passage to face the rush alone. He was dizzy and heartsick. Crutch, whom he had defended at the cost of his job—Crutch, whose foolish audacity had put him in this hole—Crutch had deserted. When he was most needed, he had run like a yellow cur. It seemed impossible to believe.

As he reached the rock where he had fought, the passage rang with yipping barks. He heard the run, close by, of padded feet. And he knew he had something worse to face than men.

"The bear pack—devils at the best. And they've been tied, an' kept hungry for——"

A big, lean hound came through without touching rock on either side. Joe stopped him with a bullet. Another came, snarling, over the rock, and a third squeezed himself through the passage. Joe fired at the one on the rock, then at the other. That instant he lived an eternity. He saw the two dogs, coming with bared fangs and dripping jaws. He thought he had fired at both—only to realize that he had but turned the gun. He could not pull the trigger on an empty gun.

He threw the weapon into the face of the one on the rock. The dog yelped in pain and slid down, only to run up again. Joe whirled to meet the other with his bare hands.

And then a third dog sprang in from the rocks. He struck Joe's shoulder and hit the ground, growling deep in his throat. He drove at the hound's foreleg, the force of his leap propelling him. The hound tried to get at his attacker's throat. His head darted to one side and then the other.

Suddenly his snarls gave way to pained cries. Instead of fighting the other dog in, he pulled away from him, fighting frantically to get out. Another jumped in to help him. Instantly the dog released the first attacker and lunged for the second. The leap threw him into relief against the moonlight. It was Crutch—tail stiff, ruff bristling, eyes flashing, teeth bared!

THE cave echoed to the growling, chopping bites of the two dogs, fighting muzzle to muzzle in a narrow space. Crutch clamped over the other's ear, and the growls changed to shrill yelps. The maddened dog ripped away and lunged with teeth clashing like knives.

Outside, the pack barked and leaped over each other in their eagerness. The night was hideous with the racket of their yelping and snapping. Joe stood back to defend the baby, should any get past Crutch. But none did.

One at a time, he took them on. He slashed forelegs, broke bones, tore into undefended stomachs, bit ears and sides and eyes. Every one of them left some part of the Airedale ragged, but none of them got past. One of them died when Crutch's teeth went into his jugular. Crutch twisted his body to meet another.

As the next rushed, with teeth gnash-

ing, slobbering in his anger, a third dog appeared on the rocks. Joe quickly unsnapped his belt, but he had no need of weapons. As Crutch suddenly backed, the third dog, lunging in, caught the other on his back. They separated instantly, but not before Crutch had smashed into them. There was a mixture of bodies and a raging wrangle of teeth. Joe could not tell in the half light which was which. He saw flashing teeth—stiff, clawing legs—a whirl of dogs. Now one was on top, now the other. Then there was only one dog.

Back to Joe, he barked a joyous, throaty bark, daring the bear pack to battle an Airedale. One of them, snarling his challenge, rushed.

Crutch backed and crouched. The other lunged, jaws open. He got his teeth into the Airedale's neck. Both went up on their hind feet. Claws dug in. Long streams of blood flowed from the gashes. There were growls—a choked snarl from Crutch. With a wrench of the head he tore away. The twist ended with a duck and grinding teeth. The howling dog dropped, with foreleg bitten to the bone.

As Crutch released his hold, the hound jumped up again, bristling and stiff-legged, teeth bared under the fiery lights of his eyes. Tight between the rocks, Crutch met a dog who fought like himself. His attack was rapierlike, rapid and slashing. His head darted from one side to the other. He, too, went for the foreleg, and he forced the tiring Crutch to the last ounce of endurance.

Every trick Crutch tried, the hound knew. Of a sudden Crutch gave vent to an excited whine. He backed. The other drove in, mouth open. Crutch, with a vicious snarl, locked his jaws over the hound's jaw—followed a long, horrible crunching. The other dog pulled away, pulled away, gurgling and choking in his pain. Suddenly Crutch let go and his teeth sank into the neck.

WHEN the hound fell, the Airedale stood over him, swaying with exhaustion, ears ragged, his curly coat soggy with blood. He was prepared to go on fighting. But the dogs did not come on.

"Now the men'll come," said Joe to himself.

He heard shots, but they were not aimed at him. Men shouted and ran. Then he heard his name called, and knew it was Jones yelling.

A little later they carried Crutch into the living room of Gertz's home. Jones walked close beside. They set the Airedale down on the rug in front of the log fire. Jones started to look at the wounds, but Crutch nosed off his hand. He looked at the cuts himself, licking and sniffling, almost turning himself inside out to get at his sides and flanks. He licked and grunted—snorted to himself. At last he stretched out on his side, closed his eyes and lay limp.

"I sure thought he'd deserted when the shootin' was on," said Joe.

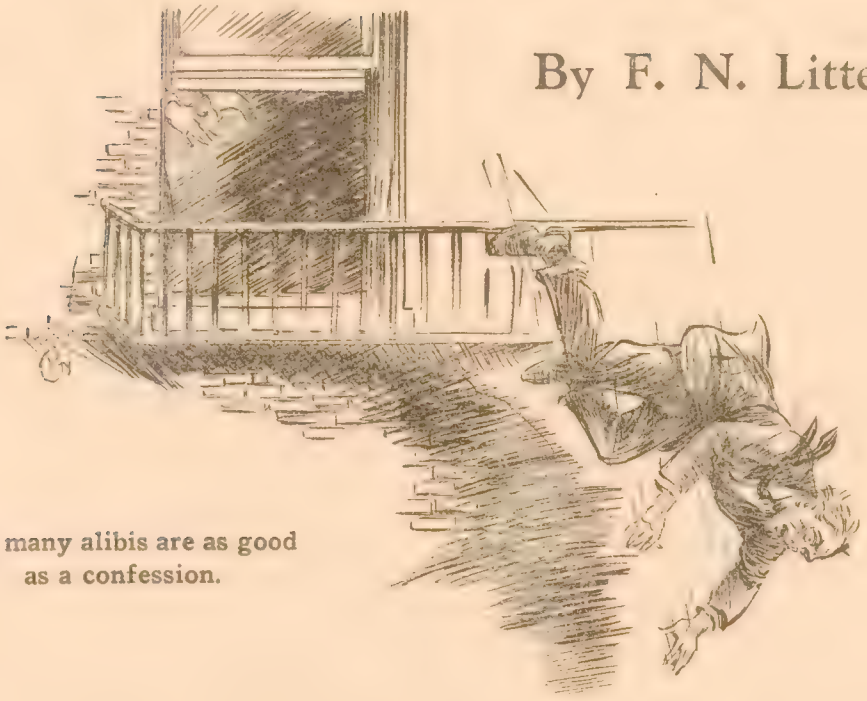
"You know where he went?" replied Jones. "He come down for me. I knew the way he acted somethin' was up. At first, I wouldn't come 'cause I was watchin' that plane. But he made me come. He don't know when he's licked, that pooch don't."

"So that's what he was doin'!" By way of asking forgiveness for his unbelief, Joe said, "You ain't such a dumb crutch."

Crutch apparently did not hear. He lay unmoving. Joe started for him, thinking he had lain down to die. Then he saw the Airedale had one eye open, observing him. The one eye twinkled —and danced—and twinkled.

The Wax Voice

By F. N. Litten



Too many alibis are as good as a confession.

IN the workroom of Miles Abadie, New Orleans jewel importer, Ivan Kremoff leaned over a spinning disk polishing the last facets of the great Brazilian diamond, "Star of Amazon." A long Russian cigarette glowed from his bearded lips. He removed the cigarette at times to mutter angrily.

"Recheck" Steve Malone, private detective, lounged in a chair behind the diamond cutter, alone with him in the little room. That was according to Abadie's order; he had employed Malone to watch the diamond—and Kremoff. Two weeks Malone had been on the tiresome job. He amused himself by checking everything in sight. He knew how many of those long cigarettes the diamond cutter smoked, and when. For example, there were now seventeen cigarette ends on the grinding table; that meant it was nearly two thirty. By three, when Kremoff quit work, there would be twenty-four. Twenty-four since one o'clock; twelve every hour. Day after day the count was the same.

Checking things was Malone's hobby; he found it paid sometimes. He asked casually:

"What'll the big rock weigh, Kremoff, when it's done?"

The Russian shrugged. He shut off the power, skinned the gloves from his long fingers, and rose.

"Exactly two hundred and six English carats." He tossed the cigarette on the grinding table. "Come, the fog is too bad, and electric light blinds one; I will work no more to-day."

"You don't like your boss," Malone said, though the question was superfluous. Kremoff was constantly betraying his dislike for Abadie. Now, with

a guttural exclamation, he waved Malone away, and, lighting another cigarette—the nineteenth, Malone noted—sat down before his lathe.

The detective, carrying the diamond, crossed the hall to a glass door directly opposite the polishing room, lettered "Miles Abadie, Importer." As he stepped into the office, Abadie, a tall, sour-featured Englishman, was just entering from his private room. He frowned at the detective, glanced sharply at his watch, then asked:

"I say, what the devil's this? Kremoff's not stopping, is he? At half after two?"

His thin voice was querulous, as if he held Malone to blame. The detective shrugged.

"Too dark. He says he can't see by electric light." Malone nodded to the window that looked out on the alley. "It is thick outside to-day—regular New Orleans winter fog."

HE handed the Star of Amazon to Abadie. The diamond merchant pocketed the stone. He stood tapping a bony finger on his teeth, regarding Malone with his pale, blinking eyes. At her desk near the door the stenographer, Miss Dumont, clicked steadily on a typewriter, the headpiece of a dictaphone clamped to her ears. Abadie's glance swung to the girl; to the clerk, Trimble, standing at a high bookkeeper's desk by the window.

Then he beckoned the detective to his room and closed the door. Malone sat down beside the littered desk. Abadie had been answering his correspondence; a second dictaphone stood by the swivel chair. He rolled it away.

"Kremoff's acting queer," he said moodily. "Y' know, of late I'm getting jumpy, suspicious, of every one about. It's the Star—be jolly glad to see it done, and sold. I've had it a long time. Never should have cut it now, but I'm pressed for cash. Dangerous to possess a diamond of such value."

Shaking his head, Abadie reached in his pocket for the diamond, regarding it with strained eyes.

"I'm a gem expert of sorts," he said. "I was a grader at Kimberly, and the Minas Gereas in Brazil. And I never saw a big stone's history but what carried murder somewhere on the page." He stared at the winking jewel, muttered, then went on: "Silly, but all week I've had a feeling hanging over me—that I was to be done in—and it might be Kremoff as well as another."

He repressed a shiver. Malone laughed, but he wondered at the strange expression in the other's face.

"Done in? Not while I'm on the job," he said. "Kremoff's sore, that's all. Says you don't pay enough. A diamond cutter in New York or London gets half again as much, he says."

"New Orleans is not New York or London," Abadie defended. "This diamond—worth twenty thousand pounds in London—will go begging here." He shifted uneasily, looked at his watch once more. "Well, keep a keen eye on Kremoff. It lacks a minute until two thirty-five; I shan't go to the vault for another quarter hour. You may wait outside now—and send Trimble with the vouchers."

As Malone went out, he checked his own watch against Abadie's, a matter of habit. The two timepieces were exactly together. He called to the clerk, John Trimble.

"Abadie wants you."

Trimble rose, shuffling a handful of loose checks. He was an intelligent, clear-eyed young man with a direct glance.

"The ghost walks to-day," he smiled, holding up the checks. "Yours is the biggest, as usual." The detective nodded. Then Trimble stepped close, whispered: "Mr. Malone, there's something I've wanted to ask you for a long

time. Are these correspondence courses any good? Can a fellow learn detective work from them?"

Malone grinned. "Guess so," he answered. "The finger-print stuff and all that, you have to get it from a book. Why?"

Trimble hesitated, then said, low-voiced, as if half ashamed:

"Well—I've been studying a course at night. I don't want to be a bookkeeper all my life. And, look at you—making as much every day as I earn in a week."

"Yeah, but I had to get wise; work out a system. I got one, y' know. They call me 'Recheck.' And it took time, kid. Still—why not go up for the police exams?"

Laying a hand on the detective's arm, Trimble said earnestly:

"I want to talk to you about that, Mr. Malone."

THERE was the impatient sound of a window slamming open in Abadie's room. Trimble broke away, but paused long enough to ask: "Would you eat dinner with me to-night?"

"Sure," answered Malone. He grinned at Trimble. After the clerk had entered Abadie's room and closed the door the detective winked at Miss Dumont. He moved to her desk.

"Trimble wants to be a dick," he said. "He thinks it's gravy."

Miss Dumont switched off the dictaphone, glanced up at him. She was a handsome girl with piercing black eyes. They always made Malone feel that she could look clear through him. Her hands were funny, though; something queer about the way they moved.

"A dee-ck," she repeated, twisting the word into a foreign sound. "I think you mean—like you? Well," and a sudden, bitter edge was in the girl's voice, "I do not blame Trimble that he has a wish to leave this place."

"Abadie doesn't stand so high with you. Why?" Malone asked easily. "What's your grievance?"

Miss Dumont turned her black, searching eyes on him. Her answer had a steel-hard ring.

"I hate him," she said.

"Why do you hate Abadie?" he asked.

Glancing up, he saw a queer thing. On Miss Dumont's lip a tiny spot of blood stood out; Malone realized her teeth had done that. She leaned down, bent almost double, and with an awkward movement wiped the blood away. That odd gesture the detective had observed before. Something *was* strange about Miss Dumont's arms. They were always at her side or resting on the typewriter keys. Malone studied her face.

"It is nothing. I have no wish to ——" The door of Abadie's office swung open and Miss Dumont halted. Abadie's voice came from within:

"That will be satisfactory."

Trimble backed out.

"Yes, Mr. Abadie," he replied, and, closing the door, turned. "Here's your check, Miss Dumont——" The clerk's voice halted. "Why, what's the matter?" He looked at the girl's flushed cheeks, swung to the detective. But Malone blandly waved his hand.

"Not a thing wrong," he answered. "Why?"

Again Trimble stared at the girl, but Miss Dumont had gotten hold of herself.

"Yes, why do you ask that?" she echoed. Trimble shrugged.

"Thought you looked excited is all—Abadie wants to sign his letters before he takes the diamond to the vault." Trimble moved on toward his desk, then turned, sorting the checks. "Let me give you yours, Mr. Malone," he said.

Miss Dumont had been in Abadie's office half a minute perhaps. As Malone waited for Trimble to find his

check he heard a suppressed cry. He swung. The girl was standing in the doorway, her eyes wide.

"Where is he?" she asked of Trimble. The clerk looked up from the checks.

"What's that?" he asked absently. Then sharply: "What——"

MALONE had darted through the door. He reached the desk, halted. Abadie was not in the room. The lower sash of the long window had been raised, and smoky wisps of fog were drifting in. Malone strode to the window, looked out. A narrow iron balcony ran along the outer wall, crossing the face of the building. The detective stepped over the low sill to the balcony floor, and, gripping the rust-eaten rail, gazed down.

The fog was dense; he could not see the alley pavement. Even the downspout from the roof that ran down beside the window disappeared in the mist. He noticed the pipe was newly painted. Then the detective glanced along the balcony to his right. A diffused yellow glow from the office window touched the rail, and farther on was a second gleam of light. Malone started. That light was from the window in the workroom. Malone thought of Kremoff. But first he had better find Abadie. The detective sprang back into the room.

Trimble was standing by Abadie's desk; his face showed bewilderment, alarm. Miss Dumont remained in the doorway; a cold fire burned in her eyes. Malone touched Trimble's arm and nodded his head significantly.

"Come along," he said tersely, and darted through the office to the hall. Abadie's offices were on the third floor of the old building. The detective took the creaky stairs two at a bound. He reached the street, rounded the corner of the building to the alley below the iron balcony. He heard Trimble running close behind. The fog was like a curtain. Malone moved more slowly, feeling his way. Then a voice came from the mist, a faint whisper, but it halted the detective in his tracks.

"Kremoff—you have done me in, you——"

Malone's breath suspended. He halted, waiting. There was no further sound. He moved on three steps, halted once more. Before him, on the alley pavement, lay a bloody, crushed shape —Abadie!

The detective knelt, lifted the body, but life had gone. Perhaps with the words Malone had heard. Trimble beside him, was saying over and over:

"He can't be dead—he can't be dead!"

Malone looked up grimly.

"He is, though." His voice hardened. "Snap out of it. Call the sixth precinct station, tell 'em to send a detail from the homicide squad."

"From the homicide squad," repeated Trimble dully. Then he turned, ran back into the fog.

Malone drew out a tiny pocket flash and examined the body closely. Abadie had struck on his skull; it was literally battered in. There was no wound that he could find. Then the detective searched the pockets for the diamond. The Star of Amazon was gone! He took out Abadie's watch; the crystal had splintered. The hands were stopped at two forty-two. Malone's timepiece pointed to exactly two forty-six. Quick work.

The detective rose, slipped his gun from its holster under his left arm. Kremoff, if he was still upstairs, might be hard to handle. He moved swiftly to the building entrance, ascended the stairs to the third story. Trimble and Miss Dumont were in the hall by the office door.

"They are on the way," the clerk whispered.

"O. K.," said Malone.

THERE was a light burning in the polishing room. Malone released the safety catch of his automatic. Holding the gun ready at his hip, he turned the knob of the workroom door, stepped in.

Kremoff was seated by the workbench, puffing at his ever-present cigarette. Two things stamped themselves instantly on the detective's brain; first, that the man showed no surprise or fear on seeing him; second, that the window to the balcony was raised. Then Kremoff glimpsed the automatic. He leaped to his feet. He glared at Malone.

"Steady, Kremoff," said Malone. "You better stick 'em up, too, till I frisk you for a gun."

The cigarette dropped from Kremoff's lips.

"Gun?" he rumbled with a frightened stare. "I have no gun. Why is it you do this?" But the automatic pointed, and he lifted his huge hands above his head.

The detective went through him quickly. There was no weapon, but he found a railroad ticket for New York dated that day. Malone's eyes narrowed. He thought a moment, then motioned to the chair.

"Sit down," he ordered. "Lift up your feet; I want to give your shoes a look." Kremoff, with a dumb stare, obeyed.

What he saw brought a queer frown to the detective's face. He said slowly:

"Kremoff, Abadie's been murdered. Before he died he named you. You'll have to come along."

Kremoff gazed at him blankly. Then his jaw fell; his muddy eyes widened.

"I kill? Me, a Dukhobor? No, it is against religion!"

"Well, that doesn't stop 'em sometimes," returned Malone. He looked down at the railroad ticket he still held in his hand. "You were leaving town, huh? In a hurry. That looks bad."

"I could earn more in New York." Kremoff twisted his big hands. "I have told you that many times."

"You picked a bad day to start." Footsteps scraped in the corridor, and Malone opened the door. Three men in plain clothes were coming down the hall. One, Detective-sergeant Bassett, Malone knew. He pushed Kremoff out before him, greeted the sergeant.

"Been a killing, Bassett," he said briefly, "and it looks like this man here."

"Yeah?" Bassett sized up the diamond cutter. "Ugly mug. Well, let's hear about it."

"Better send a man downstairs; the body's in the side alley. I left it for you to see." Bassett nodded and dispatched one of his two men. He turned:

"All right, Malone, unload."

Malone sketched in the story of the last quarter hour.

"Cuff him, O'Day. I'll have a confession outa him by night. Let's see that office. Might get my finger-print man in, huh?" He swung to the clerk Trimble. "You come on, I want to talk to you."

MALONE went with Bassett and Trimble into the room.

"Nothing's been touched," he said. "Might be some prints on the sill. I climbed through, of course."

Bassett turned and gazed out the open window.

"It'd be a cinch to cross the balcony from the workshop, all right." He turned to Trimble. "Where was your boss standing when you went out? Just what happened while you were in here?"

Trimble pointed. "He sat at this desk. He signed the checks, then got up, pushed his chair back, and walked to the window."

"Did he say anything?" pursued the detective sergeant. "You were the last

in here with him. Anything look wrong?"

Trimble wet his lips. He half turned. The two men, following his glance, saw Miss Dumont at the office door. She was gazing at Trimble, level-eyed.

"Huh!" exclaimed the sergeant. "You mean this girl saw Abadie after the——"

"No," the clerk broke in in some agitation. "She was in here hardly a minute."

"Say, you act funny." Bassett cocked his head on one side. "Maybe you know something, hey?"

Trimble's lips quivered. Then he drew up.

"I don't know what you mean," he answered, "but I'll tell you exactly what happened. Mr. Abadie was leaning back in his chair. He asked me, just before he got up, if I would take the pay checks to the workroom. I said: 'Just as soon as I post them in the pay-roll book.' He stood by the window then, and I was at the door. Then he said, 'That will be satisfactory' ——" The clerk paused, swung to Malone and Miss Dumont. "You heard him say that, surely you did. Just as I came out."

Malone said: "Right, Trimble, I did."

Miss Dumont nodded, too. Bassett snorted.

"Why all the goofy looks at this girl, then? Why couldn't you talk straight up?" His voice showed disgust. But Trimble had recovered.

"I'm not used to murders, that's why," he answered angrily.

Malone was staring at the floor. Suddenly he dropped to his knees by the window. When he rose he held in his fingers a crumpled scrap of paper. Bassett leaned over his shoulder.

"What is it?" he asked.

Malone shook his head. "I don't know. But it wasn't here before." He smoothed out the scrap, a piece of white paper scarcely an inch square. On it was written:

253 1-(2/3) 2-(9) 3-(8) 4-(1/6)

The detective sergeant shrugged.

"It's nothing. We don't need any more than what you heard Abadie say to put this Kremoff on the spot. Where's your phone? I'll call the wagon. Don't want to walk a guy down Canal Street at this time of day."

"The telephone's in the next room," Malone said.

Bassett strode through the door, called the precinct station and the morgue.

"I'LL have 'em pick up the stiff. Have a look at it first." Bassett swung around. Kremoff, manacled to O'Day, leaned stolidly against the wall. The detective sergeant thrust his chin into the other's face.

"Where'd you hide out the big rock after you croaked him?" he asked threateningly. "Sing, or you'll take a dose of rubber hose when I get you in."

Kremoff's eyes smoldered.

"Who is it says I kill? He lies. I know nothing of the Star since Malone take it."

Bassett struck him twice across the mouth; hard blows with the heel of his palm. "Like it, you punk?" he sneered. "You get plenty more; yeah, and you'll sing, too, 'fore this night's done." He nodded to O'Day. "Bring him along; we'll wait for the wagon downstairs. You coming, Malone?"

Malone shook his head.

"I'll be where you can reach me any time. Here, or at home."

"O. K." The sergeant turned and followed O'Day and his prisoner out into the hall.

Malone looked at his watch. It was just three thirty—an hour since he had held the Star of Amazon in his hand. Abadie's prophecy of murder had come to pass—and swiftly. He looked about

him. Trimble sat dejectedly on the stool by his desk; Miss Dumont, with Abadie's letters in a neat pile before her, was signing them coolly. She looked at the detective.

"These are routine letters. I will mail them."

"Better write Abadie's partner in New York what's happened," said Malone. "Trimble, check up on the workmen's stock and lock it in the vault. Tell them they can go. You can go, too, both of you. I want this place to myself."

Trimble stood up.

"I guess you won't go to dinner with me, then?"

"Why, yes," answered Malone. "Come back about six. I'll be ready."

After they left and the police gong in the alley signaled the departure of the sergeant, Malone returned to Abadie's room and seated himself in the swivel chair. He was disgruntled. Murder and robbery had happened; right under his eye. And Kremoff, as the killer, didn't fit. It had been too transparently clear. He closed his eyes, tipped up the chair.

The back struck something and stopped. Malone, turning, saw it was the frame of the dictaphone. That was odd, because Trimble had told Sergeant Bassett how Abadie had leaned back just before going to the window. If Trimble was right, some one had moved the dictaphone. Malone looked it over.

On a shelf below the body of the machine were a dozen boxes containing the wax cylinders. Malone observed that each carried a penciled number on the cover. One number touched a memory chord. "253 to 260." He recalled then the paper he had found caught in the baseboard by the window, took it from his pocket. Yes, the number 253 was on it. He removed the wax cylinder from box 253, tried to fit it on the platen of the dictaphone. But there was a cylinder in the machine already; Malone did not know how to remove it. It might mean nothing. He dismissed the matter for a time, and his thoughts turned back to Kremoff.

BUT as Malone revolved the murder, the confusion in his thoughts grew. Those last words of Abadie's: "Kremoff, you have done me in," were proof enough. Yet something ticked a constant protest in the detective's brain. Habit was too strong; he must recheck. At last Malone got to his feet, crossed the hall to the workroom and switched on the light. As he looked about him, the detective's eyes narrowed. He stood a long time gazing at the cutting table.

He reëntered the office and began a systematic search through the two desks, Trimble's and Miss Dumont's. Not with a hope of finding anything; it was a mechanical process with Malone. Trimble's desk drawers were neat, precisely kept. There was an envelope marked "Personal," in which were many letters, none of consequence; receipts covering the down payment on the course in criminology, another in accounting; and some bills from a Professor Fontain at an obscure address on Gravier Street.

But in Miss Dumont's desk Malone found something that brought a quick gleam to his eyes. A duplicate of the paper he had taken from the baseboard by Abadie's window. He studied the string of numbers, his forehead plowed by deep lines. "253 1-(2/3) 2-(9) 3-(8) 4-(1/6)."

The sound of a step in the hall interrupted him. Malone closed the drawer and glanced at his watch. He had not realized that it was six o'clock. The clerk, entering the office, sent a sharp, puzzled glance at Malone, still seated by Miss Dumont's desk. It seemed there was a faint alarm in his eyes.

"Am I too early?" he asked. The detective shook his head.

"No; it's all right," he answered briefly, and rose from the desk chair.

The two left the building and went out into the fog of old Triades Street.

They ate dinner in a quiet restaurant of the clerk's selection. Malone, with an effort, threw off his abstraction, and after a time became genial, friendly. He asked many questions. Trimble was frank to talk about himself. His replies amused Malone. The clerk had been a craft without a rudder, it seemed. He had attempted everything—the stage engineering by mail, aviation, ship's radio. Now he was set on the detective profession. Malone gave him his own system.

"None of this mystery stuff works—in a real crime. Just study the facts and check 'em—check 'em a dozen times if you have to. Don't miss looking at everything twice. That's my idea."

Trimble, when he left the restaurant, was enthusiastic.

"I appreciate all you've told me, Mr. Malone. You've given me a real boost."

Malone walked to the corner, stopped. He laid his hand on the clerk's arm.

"You can," he said, hesitating. "I'll tell you plain; we haven't touched bottom on this murder. I want you to come back with me to the office. There's something I've found that I don't savvy. Maybe you can help unravel it. Will you?"

Trimble's face lighted up.

"Will I!" he exclaimed. "I hope to say I will."

A FEW minutes later Malone unlocked the office door, asked:

"How well do you know Miss Dumont?"

"Pretty well," Trimble replied. His tone implied more than that. Again there was a faint suggestion of disquietude in his glance. A look of indecision crossed the detective's face. But he opened the door and led the way to Abadie's room.

The wax cylinder from the box numbered 253 was on the desk. Malone pointed to it.

"I want to hear this. Put it on the machine, will you?" he requested. Trimble looked at him wonderingly, but obeyed. He set the dictaphone on reverse, and Malone, with a queer thrill, heard Abadie's voice:

"Memo 253. February 21st.

"Ivan Kremoff. You are aware of the great value of this stone, and will understand why I have employed a special police guard. It is done to protect me from outside thieves, and in no way is it a reflection on your honesty. The facet design will be seventy-two above the girdle——" The voice droned on, giving technical instructions. Finally it stopped.

"That's all," said Trimble. His look of bewildered surprise was still in evidence. The detective pointed to the cylinder.

"What was Abadie's idea, telling all that into the machine?" he asked. "And the 'Memo 253'—what's that for?"

"All of Mr. Abadie's instructions he gave by dictaphone. Miss Dumont copied and numbered them; it was her idea," explained the clerk.

"Let's hear the record again," said Malone.

This time he was studying the scrap of paper with the cryptic numbers. Suddenly he held up his hand. The clerk, at the signal, shut off the machine.

"The words on these cylinders aren't numbered, are they?" he asked.

"No, but there's a line index; like on a typewriter," Trimble explained. "So you can find your place if you want to check back on what you've said."

"Check back?" repeated the detective. He glanced down at the scrap of paper. "Well, can you hit line No. 1, the second and third words—and then stop?"

"Don't think I can hit words," said

Trimble. "I'll try, though." He bent over the dictaphone.

"Kremoff—you——" came from the mouthpiece startlingly. The detective's eyes glittered.

"Now see if you can catch the ninth word on line No. 2; the eighth on line 3, and——"

"Wait," protested Trimble. "Two's enough; I can't remember more." The needle scratched, then the voice of the dead man said faintly: "have—done now——"

Suddenly the clerk threw down the mouthpiece.

"My God!" he cried. "It's Abadie's last words!" He gazed at Malone, a look of horror, a terrible fear growing in his eyes.

"Try line 4 now, the first and sixth words," Malone said steadily.

"I—I can't," muttered Trimble. He stared at the detective with a weak defiance. Then, as if hypnotized, he turned to the dictaphone once more. The motor whirred, and after a moment, from the mouthpiece, came two words:

"—me—in——"

THE room was still a long time. At last Malone said:

"You were in on this, Trimble. How did you work it?"

The clerk stared at him, his face gray-white.

"Me? I—I don't know what it all means," he said hoarsely. "I swear I don't!" He started. "Why, Malone, those words—they couldn't be heard across the room! How could they carry down three stories? Malone, you're not accusing me of murder? I'm as innocent as you."

The detective looked about him unswervingly. Of a sudden he sprang to the dictaphone, lifted the tube. There was a tiny smear of red on the black rubber of the mouthpiece. Paint, red paint—the detective's memory gave him the answer. He wheeled, ran to the window, and, opening it, flashed his pocket torch on the down-spout. A joint in the spout close by the window had been dented, leaving a gap in the telescoping pipes. It was large enough to admit the mouthpiece of the dictaphone.

Malone turned. Trimble had advanced to the window. The detective said, as if thinking aloud:

"A joint in the down spout's been hammered in. The tube of that machine was shoved through; the paint smear proves it."

The clerk shook his head, a hopeless and yet a stubborn gesture.

"I still say the sound wouldn't carry," he denied. Then, conviction hardening his voice: "How could I have moved the machine from this desk to the window? I was with you every second till"—he shuddered—"we found Abadie. Besides, *he was alive* when I left this room. You heard his voice—you said so."

"Perhaps the words I heard came from this machine, too," Malone began slowly. With desperation in the gesture, Trimble started the dictaphone.

"Now go to that door," he cried. "Listen—it's only a murmur. How could you—any one—be deceived?"

The detective shook his head. Trimble was right, the voice did not carry to the door. As for a device, an attachment, to magnify the sound, there was none on the machine. It did not need an expert to see that.

And yet the scrap of paper was a key. Trimble's alibi was ironclad, but—there was Miss Dumont! A duplicate of the cryptic numerals he had found in her desk. She had been alone in Abadie's room while he and Trimble had gone down into the alley. She could have moved the dictaphone. Last, she hated Abadie.

The clerk came to him, his eyes sick with horror.

"Mr. Malone, you can't stop now. Those ghastly figures are a coincidence. That voice could not have come from this room. Try it; prove for yourself I'm right."

Malone stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean—put the dictograph tube in that pipe and start the motor. Go to the alley and listen."

Malone laughed. "Yeah?" he said quizzically. Trimble clenched his hands.

"You think I'll cheat. Why should I?" Trimble straightened. "I have proved my innocence. Now I want a chance to clear"—he hesitated—"Marie Dumont."

The detective studied Trimble carefully. The youth's face had reddened slightly, but his eyes were earnest, pleading.

"Miss Dumont is what—to you?" asked Malone.

"Nothing—now," replied Trimble with significance.

For a time Malone was silent; thinking fast. He made his decision, nodded.

"All right," he said, "we'll try it."

He watched Trimble roll the machine to the window, fit the tube. Then the detective went out, down the stairs to the alley. Miss Dumont was Trimble's sweetheart. He smiled grimly. He was positive he would not hear the voice.

REACHING the alley, he moved along the building wall to the downspout, and stopped. He hammered the pipe, listened. He heard the faint scrape of the needle, the motor whirring. Then, distinctly, almost like a living voice, Malone heard again:

"Kremoff—you have done me—in."

He backed against the wall, astounded. Trimble's last proof had turned against himself; he had, unconsciously, betrayed the woman he loved. Malone returned to the building, climbed the stairs slowly. His thoughts were in a tangle. The finger of suspicion that had first touched Kremoff, and then Trimble, had lifted from them both; rested heavily on Marie Dumont. Malone recalled that she had shown no surprise at hearing Abadie was dead.

In the office doorway Trimble was waiting. He asked, his voice strained, eager:

"Well?"

"You were wrong. The voice carried. The pipe gave it volume, maybe."

The clerk stumbled into the room. He gave Malone a wild stare of unbelief, then, sinking to the chair by Marie Dumont's desk, buried his face in his arms. It was unpleasant for Malone, too, but duty was duty. He said:

"I can't chance it that you'll see the girl between now and morning. You'll have to sleep in the station house tonight."

Trimble leaped up.

"You can't do that!" he cried. "I'm in the clear—no court would hold me."

"Maybe not," replied Malone. "But you're a material witness; you'll do what I say. What's this girl's address? I can find it if you don't give it to me, Trimble."

"It's 1627 St. Charles," the clerk muttered after a pause.

Malone switched off the office lights, locked the door. He started down the dark hall with Trimble, then paused. He had forgotten something; something he must recheck. Malone touched the clerk's arm.

"Have to go back a minute. Come on." The two retraced their steps. As the detective halted at the door, fumbling for his key, he caught a tap of footfalls, faint but unmistakable. Some one was coming up the stairs. Listening a moment, he pulled Trimble back into the deeper shadows by the balcony window.

"Quiet," he whispered.

The footsteps became more distinct. Then—at the stair head, Malone judged—they again ceased. More confidently they came on, approached the office, halted once more. As the figure leaned down to fit the key in the lock, Malone recognized Marie Dumont.

TRIMBLE gave a sudden cry, but the wind slammed the opening door against the wall; covering the sound of his voice. The next instant Malone's gun jammed his ribs.

The girl had not heard. She closed the office door. Through the opaque glass Malone saw the beam of an electric torch flickering. He pushed Trimble to the workroom, unlocked it, shoved the clerk inside. Then he snapped one bracelet of a handcuff on Trimble's wrist, and the other to a heating pipe. He warned:

"Make a noise—and it'll be tough for you."

Moving into the corridor, Malone locked the door. Then, crossing to the office, stood listening. He heard the faint rustle of paper, desk drawers opening. Carefully Malone tried the office door. He slipped inside.

The flash light played over the desk in Abadie's room. Marie Dumont was searching through it. Evidently that for which she looked was not there. The torch beam moved, touching the walls, exploring every corner. Malone felt for the wall switch, pressed it. The lights flashed on blindingly. Marie Dumont, with a stifled scream, snatched out for something on the desk.

Her arm moved with that awkward hitch. The detective reached the desk and picked up a woman's handbag. He sprung the clasp. There was a small revolver inside. Malone broke the gun, pocketed the cartridges, then looked up gravely.

"Ready to shoot it out, eh?" he said.

The girl's eyes were menacing.

"Yes—if that were necessary."

"You came back—for the Star of Amazon?" continued the detective, a question in his voice. "Of course—not safe to carry it away this afternoon. Was that it?"

Marie Dumont's face did not change. Malone took the scrap of paper from his pocket.

"You are smart," he said. "But I found this under the window. It is yours, isn't it?"

The girl stared at the sheet; still her white face betrayed nothing. "I have never seen this before," she said. "What is it?"

Malone lifted his shoulders, tried a new tack.

"Tell me, how long had you been planning to kill Abadie?"

At this Marie Dumont only laughed, but it had a chill sound.

"Come." Malone's voice hardened. "You did it. Pushed him through the window, over the balcony rail. Timed it just right, didn't you?"

"I would make no denial if I had killed Abadie. I told you I hated him," rejoined the girl coolly enough. "Unfortunately, as you may have observed, I cannot lift my arms." With a slow, painful effort, she rolled her dress sleeves, first the right, then the left. Both forearms were wasted, shriveled. Malone remembered those awkward, slow gestures that had puzzled him. "There is not a child's strength in them," she said. "I find it difficult enough to press the keys of the writing machine." Her eyes flamed. "An injury to the spinal cord. A bullet—Abadie's bullet—did that."

"Abadie's bullet!" exclaimed Malone.

MARIE DUMONT bent her head. Then her eyes lifted; they met his, carrying a sinister gleam.

"But that is not why I hate him. Do you know from where the Star of Amazon came? I will tell you. It was stolen with other stones from my

husband, who had his small workings near the great Minas Gereas in the Brazilian field. Stolen at night from his pillow, while I slept by his side. A bullet in the dark killed him; a second crippled me. But not before my husband's knife had struck; left one thief dying in the room. And in death this man gave me the name of the one who had paid him to rob us."

She paused. Malone's face was rigid.

"Well?" he muttered.

Marie Dumont gazed coldly at him.

"It was Miles Abadie," she answered. "He was overseer at the Minas Gereas then." A long silence followed. The girl resumed. "Before I recovered he had gone away. I have searched five years to find him," she concluded wearily, "to be cheated in the end—of my revenge; and the Star of Amazon."

The detective, half bewildered, said:

"But Abadie—he must have known your——"

She laughed bitterly. "He only paid the thieves. They robbed where they pleased. He did not know—or care—whom."

Again there was silence. The detective tried to get his thoughts in order. Every clew was shattered.

"Do you intend to marry Trimble?" Malone said at last, an abrupt, harsh question.

The girl gazed at him searchingly; shook her head. "That does not concern you. Well, he has not asked yet. I think he knows my heart is buried with Hernando, my husband."

"You told him of Abadie?"

Marie Dumont nodded. She stepped forward eagerly.

"Now you understand why I came to-night. To find the Star, which is mine by right. And it is hidden in this room. I sense it."

"Sense it!" ejaculated Malone.

"Yes." Marie Dumont bent her head. "I have lived in the diamond fields all my life. Those who know will tell you there is a sense, a feeling, when one is near to a great diamond."

The detective gazed at her with an incredulous smile.

"It will be hard to convince the courts that the Star of Amazon is yours. They will agree that what you've told me is motive for a murder." Malone flashed a sudden glance at Marie Dumont. "It's nearly midnight," he resumed, "I'll have to ask you to leave now—but be back to-morrow. And I'll want a doctor's certificate on your injury." He paused. "And you're sure you don't know what the figures on this paper mean?"

"I have said I did not." Reluctantly the girl moved to the door. "Doctor Maras, at the Gravier Clinic, will tell you my arms are cripples. Yes, I will be here to-morrow."

Malone waited till her footsteps on the stairs had died away. Then he released Trimble from the workroom. The clerk frowned at him angrily as he unlocked the handcuffs.

Malone said: "Another shock-proof alibi, maybe!" And Trimble's face lighted. The detective went on: "You can go now, but be here in the morning."

"I'll be here," replied the clerk. His anger had suddenly evaporated. "Until this thing's all straight; or Marie's cleared, anyway. An alibi, eh? That's good."

AT nine o'clock the morning following the murder, Detective Sergeant Bassett had a phone call from Malone. Bassett's temper was short. The whole card of the third degree had failed to shake Kremoff's denial of guilt. However, the detective sergeant agreed sullenly to meet Malone at the office of the diamond merchant in a half hour.

On arriving he found a stranger with Malone, a cadaverous man in flashy clothes. The private detective introduced him as Mr. Klinger. Marie Dumont was clearing out her desk, Trim-

ble making desultory entries in the books of account. Malone led the detective sergeant and Mr. Klinger to Abadie's room and closed the door.

"You failed to get Kremoff's confession?" he asked.

Bassett agreed sourly. Malone bent close. He told the officer all that had occurred during the hours following the murder. He gave the sergeant some details as to Mr. Klinger, which Bassett accepted doubtfully. Then Malone called Trimble and Miss Dumont.

"I'm going to rehearse what happened yesterday," he said. "Miss Dumont, Trimble—I want you to help me act it out. I believe we may clear up this thing. Come."

The detective moved to the window. Raising the sash, he stepped out on the balcony, swung around. His gaze fixed on Marie Dumont.

"Abadie stood here," he began. "Not inside the window. There were rust marks from the gratings on his shoes. So—a child might have thrust him off balance. Why, you, Miss Dumont, could strike me with your shoulder now and I would fall."

The detective paused. Marie Dumont's lips were bloodless; there was a defiant glitter in her eyes.. Malone continued; his tone was casual, but his eyes never left the girl's face. She glared at him.

"Of course Kremoff would be suspected. But Kremoff has a habit that, for me at least, proves him innocent. Cigarettes, I mean. Each afternoon, between one and three he smokes twenty-four cigarettes; one every five minutes, as regularly as a clock ticks." He turned to Bassett. "I have rechecked that fact daily in the weeks I've been here. Now, then, ten minutes before Abadie was killed, I left Kremoff in his workroom—with seventeen cigarette ends on his workbench. The time was two twenty-five. At two forty, fifteen minutes after the murder, when I arrested Kremoff in his workroom, there were twenty cigarette ends—one for each five minutes while I had been gone. Kremoff did not throw a man off the balcony—commit murder—with a cigarette between his lips. Did he, sergeant?"

Bassett scowled.

"Damned if I know. He might have."

"He might have," Malone agreed dryly, and resumed: "But there were no rust marks on his shoes! Well, let that go. I'll make a guess at the whereabouts of the Star of Amazon, though, while I'm here. Now, this water pipe with a dented slip joint; it has been painted recently; any one would say it was too conspicuous a hiding place. Still——" He reached up into the crevice between the lapped joints, and after a moment drew out a round object in a bit of chamois. Malone shook from the cloth into his palm—the Star of Amazon!

BASSETT, with a harsh exclamation, sprang close, staring at the cold, radiant jewel. The thin man sucked in his breath. From Trimble's face he might have been gazing at a miracle. Only Marie Dumont showed no surprise. Her eyes held that glitter of defiance. She held herself rigidly erect and belligerent.

Malone scrubbed at his paint-smeared fingers with a handkerchief.

"This red stuff sticks. We noticed that last night, eh, Trimble?"

The clerk's eyes flickered. He shot a quick glance at Marie Dumont, then turned away.

The detective climbed down into the room.

"Now," he said, "we'll go over what happened in the office outside." The three men and Marie Dumont followed. He pointed through the door. "Sit down there at your desk, Miss Dumont, as you were yesterday when you told

me how you hated Abadie. Trimble, you had just come out with the checks."

From his wallet Malone withdrew the check the clerk had given him the day before. He passed it over.

"Take it. We will assume you are holding all the checks," he said, smiling. "Now place your hand on the knob. Let's see; that is about as you stood yesterday." Malone moved Trimble around. "Yes; like that. You were looking through the door, it was partly closed, and Abadie said—— What did he say?"

From the room beyond came a voice —Abadie's voice!

"That will be satisfactory."

It was weird; uncanny. Marie Dumont screamed, put her head down on the desk. Bassett's lips twisted in a clear scowl. The tall man, Mr. Klinger, held a handkerchief before his face. But Trimble's face was like ashes.

Malone turned to him, gave a quick nod.

"Correct," he said. "And next, Trimble gave me my pay check." He took the check from the clerk, reversed it. "And I find, on the other side, this!"

Suddenly Malone's voice rang, metal hard.

"How did it get there, Trimble?"

The clerk, staring at the check, began shaking like a palsied man. He tried to speak, but the words trailed off to muttering.

"Perhaps the hand that murdered Abadie," the detective said, "left that smear there! Trimble, when you had the Star of Amazon safely hidden, after you hurled Abadie from the window, you failed to recheck. You were too sure. You thought your double alibi, that faked voice of Abadie's—then the dictaphone trick which put the crime on Miss Dumont—could not be broken. But you failed to remove all the paint smears from your fingers."

TRIMBLE whipped a hand inside his coat, but Bassett clamped his forearms in a viselike grip and twisted. Trimble's weapon fell. The sergeant clicked a pair of handcuffs on the clerk's wrists.

"Gun play, eh?" he gritted. "That's as good as a signed sheet. I won't need to work a confession outa you."

Trimble said dully: "Yes, I killed him." He glanced at Malone under his brows. "I wanted the stone. I thought you were fooled. You were, part of the time?"

Malone looked up at the question. He smiled slowly.

"Too many alibis, Trimble; too ingenious, this voice out of the dictaphone. Miss Dumont was smart enough to have done it, yes; but too smart to leave two numbered papers—clews—where I would stumble on them." He shook his head. "And you found the words on the cylinder so easily. I checked it again after you'd gone; I couldn't do it. Then I hooked up the dictaphone to the drain pipe, went down to the alley; a recheck again. But the sound *didn't* carry."

The detective took a letter from his coat.

"And in your desk was this receipted bill from Professor Fontaine. I always recheck, I told you that. So I looked him up this morning. A ventriloquist. You'd taken lessons in voice projection —for the stage. He said you could do it well. Then that thick fog in the alley helped; I couldn't see you. So I paid Klinger to come over here. He's on at the Orpheum this week, a clever ventriloquist. I put a cylinder on the dictaphone, let him hear Abadie's voice. It upset you, Trimble. I counted on that. More than on the smeared check. I thought you might remember how the check looked when you gave it to me. Because—I smeared that spot of paint on it myself—this morning."

"Steerin' a ship and shippin' a steer may be two different things, but——"

Lazy For Convenience

By William Bruner

REACHING down from his saddle, "Ol' Man" Barnett picked up a long spear of grass, upon which he chewed thoughtfully with strong, horsy teeth. He cursed expressively. His two companions nodded glumly, in complete agreement.

Tully Maddux, who squinted with his left eye, and Bert Sanford, of the Sanford boys, could offer plenty of sympathy but no advice. This outrage was something new in their varied experiences. They had encountered plenty of rustling, to be sure, but nothing quite so wholesale and high class.

"Here comes yore boy," said Tully Maddux, squinting his eye toward Middle Pass. "Don't see how come he got here so quick. Reckon he ain't much account on a ranch after puttin' four years in the navy, huh, Michael?"

Ol' Man Barnett's shaggy, gray eyebrows lowered in a heavily disapproving frown.

"It all depends," he said irritably. "Mike knows a heap about tying knots an' such, as well as considerable information you might call useless. Steerin' a ship an' shippin' a steer may be two altogether different things——"

"But yuh can't do neither when yuh ain't got neither," Bert Sanford interrupted, his deep voice booming unhappily. Bert was a little man, twisted like a mesquite and as hard, but his voice was a thing to hear and to remember.

"May be two altogether different things," Ol' Man Barnett continued grouchily, "but, knowing about one might help when you're doing the other. Mike's sorta lazy, since what he calls his cruise, but he's bright an' very observing. Also, if he ain't no smarter than his old man, I stand to lose about ten thousand dollars I could maybe use."

Mike Barnett clattered in at a gallop, puzzled by the lack of either cattle or activity. Mike's eyes, gray and clear like his father's, were wide open and staring against the tropic tan of his lean face; and his black brows, meeting as they did over his straight, short nose, heightened this effect.

"What's up?" he asked.

Ol' Man Barnett pointed at the fence, which was down in a tangled mass of barbed wire and spindling, crooked posts, for more than a hundred feet. A broad trail ran from the break across the rough fringe of foothills toward the brown valley.

"Somebody," said Ol' Man Barnett, "has saved us the trouble of shippin' them steers of our'n—all two hundred of 'em. In other words, they have been removed to parts unknown by persons unknown—which is a damn sight luckier for them than it is for us!"

"Done anything about it?"

Ol' Man Barnett snorted. "Sure, we've done something about it. We followed 'em, son, to Welton, an' then we sorta gave up in disgust. They was loaded on a train, an' I guess by now they're in Yuma."

"El Paso," suggested Bert Sanford. "I lost mine, too—'bout a hundred head. Ninety-two, to be exact."

"We was thinkin' bout notifyin' the inspector," Tully Maddux said, "when we saw you comin'. Bert says he was to be at his brother's place very early this mornin'."

Bert Sanford nodded.

"That inspectors's a pain in the hip," he growled. "But I reckon he's our best bet. He might know what to do, if anything."

It was decided, after considerable argument; that the three ranchers would ride to their neighbors'—the Randalls, the Cendoyas, and the Martins—to spread the news, while Mike went to Sam Sanford's place, just beyond Bert's, and got Mr. Higgs, the new cattle inspector. They were to reunite, as soon as possible, at Welton.

"You might find Sam in a pretty nasty humor," Bert Sanford said, as he rode away, "because he's sick. Sam always gets onery when he's sick."

BY the time Mike reached Sam Sanford's place, it was hot. There was no one around the house, but Sam's rattletrap of a car was there, along with a new sedan, which Mike took to be the inspector's. Sam's place was a weather-worn remnant of a once extensive adobe, lacking in every convenience. The yard was littered with tin cans and all manner of useless junk, including the scattered parts of at least two automobiles. Even the tall cottonwoods which shaded the place seemed forlorn.

Mike dismounted, dropping his pony's reins on the ground. As he scuffed past Sam's car, he could feel the glow of heat from the radiator. The motor meter on the inspector's car indicated that Higgs's engine was cool.

As Mike walked across the yard, combining the peculiarities of a sailor's walk and a cowpuncher's in his rolling, awkward stride, a man appeared in the dark oblong of the ranch-house door. He was tall, narrow shouldered and bent in the middle. His nose was thin and crooked, as though habitual sleeping on his left side had twisted it to the right; and his eyes were a pale, almost-yellow brown. Though he had never seen the man before, Mike knew it was Mr. Higgs, the new cattle inspector.

Introducing himself, Mike casually told the inspector that nearly three hun-

dred head of cattle had been stolen from his father and Bert Sanford. Higgs seemed to be annoyed.

"And I guess they expect me to find their cattle for them?" he inquired.

"They sort of acted that way," Mike admitted. "How's Sam?"

"I think he's got the pip!" Higgs snapped. "I just got here about ten minutes ago, and all I've got out of him is groans. Come in."

Mike followed the inspector into the dim, cool adobe. A greasy table stood in the center of the room, piled high with unwashed tinware and glass jars of salt, sugar and moldy preserves. The rusty range was likewise cluttered with frying pans and battered kettles. The oven door was missing. Mike remembered seeing both of them in the yard.

"Howdy," Mike said, looking at Sam, who lay fully dressed on a bunk in the corner. His forehead was smudged with black, and his face was in need of a shave.

"I'm sick," Sam Sanford groaned. His voice was querulous and thin—as different from his brother's as were the two men themselves. Once, Mike had wondered why the Sanford boys lived apart, but now he knew. Very few people would care to live with Sam.

"You're Mike Barnett, back from the navy, ain't you?" Sam continued.

"The same," Mike grinned. "Came over to get Mr. Higgs, and to tell you that Bert lost all the steers he was planning to sell, along with two hundred head from the Bar X. They were on this side of the range, so it'd be handier when it came time to ship. Some one came along—last night, we figure—an' saved us all that trouble by stealing every cussed one of 'em!"

"I ain't surprised," Sam said—almost, it seemed to Mike, with mean satisfaction. "Bert an' your old man was always too trusting. Tell 'em I'm all cut up over it, but I'd die if I tried to help any. I was even too sick to show Mr. Higgs them bulls he came to see me about."

Mr. Higgs made uncomplimentary noises in his throat and suggested that he and Mike get going.

"If you're as sick as you sound," he advised from the doorway, "maybe you'd better hunt up a doctor. And if you manage to pull through, Mr. Sanford, I'll be around again next week."

"Maybe I'll go to Wilcox," Sam said. "You might tell Bert I was thinking about it."

"Nice-looking bus there," Mike said, as Higgs climbed into his car.

The deputy grunted. "New," he said. "Can't make more than twenty in it, or it heats up. You coming with me?"

"Thanks. I'll ride back. The road's much farther and pretty rough. I ought to make Welton about the same time you do."

OL' MAN BARNETT had already arrived at Welton, along with Cendoya—a tall, lean and very dignified young Mexican—when Mike got there. Bert Sanford had come in with Randall; but Tully Maddux, who had a longer ride than any of them, was still out.

"Find Higgs?" Ol' Man Barnett demanded.

Mike nodded. "He'll get here. Seems like a slow and deliberate sort of cuss."

Mike joined the others on the top rail of the cattle pen and waited in the hot sun for the arrival of Mr. Higgs. There was no shade at Welton, and very little else, save a two-story, frame section house, painted yellow, long since boarded up and deserted. The railroad, with its many spurs into the adjoining mountains, had been put through in the days when the country knew a mining boom. Only one train a week puffed over it now—from Kleeson, in South Pass, to a junction on the main line. The fireman and engineer, who lived in Kleeson, were the only ones in the

country who took the once-a-week service seriously.

It was nearly noon when Mr. Higgs arrived, with a bubbling radiator. He gave each of the ranchers a curt, businesslike nod as he approached, rasping his bony hands together.

"Now about those steers," he said. "Young Mr. Barnett tells me you missed them this morning?"

"He was exaggerating," Ol' Man Barnett snapped. "As you know, we was planning to ship in a couple days. Fella from Imperial Valley was buying 'em outright—fifty dollars a head. Nice man to deal with, too—named Yancey. But some plenty-smart hombre—some one, Mr. Higgs, who ain't no stranger in these parts—beat us to it. Drove 'em down here to Welton, an' loaded 'em right out of our own shipping pen. They're darn near to Yuma by now, I reckon."

"El Paso," insisted Bert Sanford.

Mr. Higgs surveyed the angry group calmly.

"Cut the fence?" he asked. "I'd like to take a look."

"Hell's bells!" Ol' Man Barnett's snort was most uncomplimentary. "What for? It looks like any cut fence'd look. What we want is for you to locate them steers, Mr. Higgs."

"He's gotta have the facts," Mike said, disengaging his long legs from the rails of the pen. "This is gonna be an A-1 investigation, see?" He turned to the inspector with an apologetic smile. "You can't blame 'em, sir, for being sorta worried about those steers."

"Three hundred cattle," Mr. Higgs explained patiently, "don't vanish like so much smoke."

"You don't know how comforting it is to hear you say that," the owner of two hundred of the missing animals muttered.

Higgs borrowed Sanford's horse and rode with the Barnetts and Cendoya to the break in the Bar X fence. No one spoke during the fast ride. The ranchers did not put much faith in the new inspector's ability. They wished Tom Larkin was back, but Tom had hit a cow on the Patagonia road one night while doing fifty miles an hour, and this Higgs had come to replace him. Tom had been a fool for speed, but he got results as long as he lasted. Ol' Man Barnett murmured something about it being hard to trace veal cutlets, which was what they'd have to do unless some one showed some activity, at least pretty soon.

While Mike and the inspector carefully examined the break, the cattlemen leaned on their saddle horns as patiently as possible and watched the proceedings with unmasked contempt.

"We sorta figured you'd maybe get in touch with the railroad an' try to locate them steers that way," Ol' Man Barnett. said at last.

"My job," snapped Mr. Higgs irritably, "is to discover and arrest the men who did this. Of course, I'll also try to loacte your cattle."

TULLY MADDUX arrived on a sweating horse.

"Hey, listen," he announced, "nobody's home on the Martin place. I ain't castin' no suspicions, but you-all know what a reputation Martin used to have around here."

"Martin's in Douglas," Higgs stated wearily. "I saw him there yesterday. You can't accuse a man just because he happens not to be home."

"Oh, howdy, Mr. Higgs," Maddux said, chagrined. "Searchin' for hoofprints?"

Mr. Higgs failed to say.

Mike looked up from a piece of wire he was trying to cut, with little success.

"Mind lending me your pliers?" he asked. "These I got wouldn't cut spaghetti."

The inspector, knowing his job, carried such things. He pulled a pair from

his coat pocket and handed them to Mike, who clipped off a foot length of wire, bent it and wrapped it in a handkerchief. He placed the small bundle in his shirt pocket and returned the pliers with thanks.

"What the hell?" demanded his father, irritated by Tully Maddux's dry, unneighborly chuckle.

"Exhibit A," Mike grinned. He swung into his saddle and favored his father with a wink which escaped the others. "We might have to prove that fence was cut." He turned respectfully to the inspector. "What next, Mr. Higgs?"

Mr. Higgs thought he would return for his car and then drive over to Kleeson, where he could get in touch with the railroad by long-distance phone. Welton and Kleeson were nearly ten miles apart by road, Mike knew, though the practically deserted mining town of Kleeson was little more than two miles from where they were now assembled.

"Seems like we're wasting a heap of time," said Tully Maddux, "but maybe you know what's best, Mr. Higgs. Can we go along with you?"

"You could do more by staying here and going over the ground again," Higgs pointed out. "Maybe some one dropped something."

Mr. Higgs rode away, his thin shoulders apparently sagging under the glances of heavy disapproval which rested on them. The cattlemen wondered which of their neighbors had stolen and shipped the steers. They were certain that no Mexicans could have carried off the job so smoothly, and it seemed equally evident that some one who lived close by had done it. Every rancher in a radius of many miles was named and discussed with mounting ire, and they finally ended by all but accusing each other.

"Shucks," said Mike in disgust, "I bet there ain't a one of you who hasn't stretched his imagination a little when branding some calves. Ain't no sense in getting sore, either. Just trail along with Mr. Higgs—who's considerably more smart than you think. Notice how he gets all the facts before he does anything?"

"Yeah," said Ol' Man Barnett, "but what makes you so sure Higgs is going to help us any?"

"Did you ever hear of ballistics?" Mike asked.

"No, son," confessed Ol' Man Barnett, "I never did."

"It's something he larned in the navy," Tully Maddux explained wearily. "Let's mosey back to Welton an' look around again, like Higgs suggests."

Mike said he was going over to Kleeson, to be on hand when Higgs arrived, and he urged his father to go with him. Ol' Man Barnett was undecided, but he knew Mike was no fool. He waved Maddux and Cendoya on their way.

"This ought to be exciting enough for you," Barnett said. "If the navy handed you anything more puzzling to chew on—"

"Shucks," Mike said, grinning very broadly, "there ain't nothing especially hot about this party—not yet, there ain't. Not when a fella knows where the steers are maybe, an' who took 'em."

Ol' Man Barnett took a heroic bite from a plug of tobacco. He got it in working order while he stared solemnly at his son. Then he shook his head.

"I reckon not," he admitted. "Do you?"

"Sure, I know." Mike jerked his thumb in the general direction of Kleeson. "It was Mr. Higgs!"

NOW, look here, Mike," protested Ol' Man Barnett reproachfully, "this ain't no time for foolin'. If you ain't kidding, why the name of low-down sin ain't you mentioned this trivial fact before?"

"Because," Mike told him, "when you

can't trust an inspector, who's supposed to be an honest man, it's time to stop trusting any one, see? Higgs couldn't do the job alone. Did you notice behind his ears? Coal dust and cinders!"

"You're the observin'est fool," Ol' Man Barnett grunted admiringly, "I ever did see an' I wouldn't mind hearing some more."

"Haven't time," Mike said. "We've got to beat Higgs over to Kleeson."

The once rip-snorting town of Kleeson was reminded of its former glories by many ruined shacks, chiefly of rattling galvanized iron. A few depressed Mexican families still lived there, as well as several old-timers whose memories were more important than their comfort. Two businesses had survived, a general store and a pool hall. Each had a telephone, connected on a party line.

"Higgs'll go to the pool hall," Mike decided, "where there's a booth. We'll listen in from the store."

They left their horses out of sight behind some crumbled adobes and went in the store to await the inspector's arrival. The storekeeper, a dried-up little man who was willing to oblige a couple of good customers, told Mike he could hang on the receiver of the party line all day for all he cared, and no questions asked.

Higgs was not long in coming, and his radiator was boiling again when he arrived. As Mike had foreseen, he went into the pool hall. Mike gently lifted the receiver and listened to the inspector's long-distance conversation. When Higgs came out again, he drove back in the direction of Welton without suspecting the presence of the Barnetts in Kleeson.

Mike grinned at his father.

"He called the railroad, all right," Mike said, "but not to trace any cattle trains." Ol' Man Barnett's face got long and solemn. "He told 'em he wanted a train to-night at Dos Caballos. Some one's shipping about four hundred head."

"The hell!" snorted Ol' Man Barnett. "There ain't that many cows up that way any more—not since the T Lazy T went under."

"There's that many now," Mike said. "They're yours an' Bert Sanford's. This is how I've got it figured out. Higgs is the brains of this stunt, and it's up to us to find out who else is mixed up in it—maybe just some Mexicans.

"Anyhow, he took the train that lays up here at Kleeson—it's over in the next gulch, an' no one'd notice or even hear it—an' there's enough cattle cars on the siding for his use. He runs it down to Welton, loads our steers an' shoots 'em up to Dos Caballos. No one knows it, of course. There's nothing at Dos Caballos any more, except the T Lazy T shipping pen and some abandoned mills. The whole line being practically out of use, there ain't no one along the way to know whether a train passed or not. See?"

"Sorta," admitted Ol' Man Barnett.

"After that, it's simple enough. He brings the train back to Kleeson. He's already told Bert Sanford that he'd be at Sam's place this morning. Why? So we could find him easy. He figured we'd put everything in his hands, which would save him a couple days. Now he's ordered a train to Dos Caballos. The railroad doesn't know and doesn't care whether there's cattle there. They're taking the inspector's word for it."

"Mike," said Ol' Man Barnett, "you didn't come back from the navy any too quick. But I don't savvy a lot of it. F'r instance—how come you got suspicious of Higgs in the first place?"

MIKE shook his head.

"Maybe I better not say," he decided. "I'd hate to make trouble for some one who wasn't guilty."

On their way back to Welton, Mike

and his father stopped by the end of the branch line to have a look at the engine. It was hooked up, as usual, to the combination passenger-and-baggage car which served the countryside. But there were plenty of cattle cars, all coupled, on a near-by switch. Mike poked around in the fire box and found a few live coals. That was enough to end all Ol' Man Barnett's doubts.

"This engine ain't supposed to been used since last Monday," he said glumly. "No coals'd last that long." He smashed his big fists together. "I sure would like to lay hands on that inspector!"

At Welton, they found only Tully Maddux and Bert Sanford. They reported that Higgs had returned and told them that the railroad was tracing all cattle trains, and that they were bound to learn, sooner or later, what had become of the stolen steers.

"I reckon he's gone to Douglas?" Mike asked.

"Yeah," said Tully Maddux. "That's where he's gone." He squinted at a high-flying buzzard. "I don't like that hombre. He's too sanctified!"

"That," growled Ol' Man Barnett, "is all you know about it. Higgs is the hombre who stole the cattle!"

"Who told you that?" Bert Sanford demanded, his deep voice booming in anger.

"Mike," said Ol' Man Barnett proudly. "Mike may be lazy, but it's only for convenience." He glared at the others belligerently, as if daring them to doubt his statement. "An' if you want us to prove it, come along tonight—to Dos Caballos!"

It was fifty miles from Welton to Dos Caballos by road, though the rail distance was considerably less. They decided to ride to Bert Sanford's place and get his car. Mike was confident that he could drive them to Dos Caballos before either Higgs or the train got there, even after taking time to eat at Bert's.

"We'd stop for Sam," Bert said, "only I reckon he's too sick."

"Yeah," Mike grunted, adding a few more miles to their already reckless speed, "I reckon he is."

There was no one in sight on the single, forlorn street of Dos Caballos. Mike ran the car into a deserted livery stable. The four of them circled over the hills in order to approach the shipping pen, a mile or so beyond, unseen.

Because Mike had refused to explain his full reasons for suspecting the inspector, Tully Maddux was frankly skeptical about Higgs' implication. There were moments when even Ol' Man Barnett, with all the faith he put in Mike's ability, was disturbingly doubtful.

THEY heard the steers before they saw them, bellowing at the setting sun.

"Michael," said Sanford with a sigh of relief, "them's my cows. I'd know 'em, after all the dehornin' and brandin' and innoculatin' I've done on 'em, even if they was in a stew!"

Ol' Man Barnett felt the same way, and the two were almost of a mind to rush out and fight for their cattle then and there. But Mike had other plans. He suggested that they wait until the steers were loaded, and then persuade the train crew to turn south toward Welton when they reached the junction, instead of north toward the main line.

"That way," he explained, "we'll get 'em home easier. Railroad might get sore, but they'll forget it when they find out they've been saved the trouble of hauling some cattle they'd never get paid for."

Mike and his father crawled away to see how many men were at the pen, while Tully Maddux and Bert Sanford made dire predictions as to what would happen to the guilty parties when caught. After a careful and almost soundless approach, the Barnetts could

look directly down on the pen. Ol' Man Barnett cursed in a half-hearted whisper.

"Look!" he muttered. "That's Sam Sanford down there with them four Mexicans."

"Yeah," Mike admitted, "it's Sam, all right. I was afraid we'd find him tangled up in this. When I got to his place this morning, his car was still warm, an' Higgs' bus was cold, though he told me he'd just drove up. I guess maybe I wouldn't got suspicious if he hadn't lied to me like that."

Ol' Man Barnett was silent for a long minute.

"Sure will be hard on Bert, finding his own brother in on this," he said slowly. "An' Sam ain't such a bad cuss, even if he is maybe a little shiftless an' no-account."

"That's what I was thinking," Mike said. "Of course, it might be possible to arrange this thing."

They looked at one another squarely.

"It might," Ol' Man Barnett agreed.

The moon was full, rising at sunset, and in that clear air it would give enough light for the loading. At the same time, a man would not be recognized at even a short distance. Mike and Ol' Man Barnett made their plans before returning to Maddux and Sanford.

"Higgs likely brought those Mexicans across the border for this one job," Mike said, discussing his scheme with the others. "They'll shove off at the first sign of trouble. That leaves the train crew—engineer, fireman, conductor and two brakemen—and Higgs and this other hombre. The train crew won't want to get mixed up in any fight over some steers.

"The train'll be going through Dos Caballos pretty slow, on account of so many switches which aren't any too sure any more. Tully and Bert will hop on down there somewhere and persuade the engineer and the rest of them that the best thing to do is to go to Welton. They'll likely agree if you can convince 'em that they're hauling stolen cattle. If not—you got guns, and they haven't. Meantime, dad and me will take care of Higgs and this other bozo."

"Who is he, anyhow?" Bert Sanford asked. "Any one we know?"

"That," Mike answered truthfully, "would be hard to say."

At seven o'clock, they heard an automobile. Mike went over to take a look and came back with the report that it was Higgs. A little less than an hour later, the empty train came puffing up the grade to Dos Caballos, and, shortly after that, the night was made noisy by the bellowing of the steers as they were driven up the chute into the cars.

MADDUX and Sanford slipped back toward Dos Caballos, while Mike and his father crept down on the pen. They were not noticed. Mike looked in Higgs' car and discovered that the inspector had left the key in the ignition lock. He turned it, took it out, and put it in his pocket. On Sam Sanford's, he lifted the hood and disconnected the spark-plug cables.

"Just in case," he whispered, "our plan misfires."

The work of loading was quickly done. The usual delay, caused by the cattle inspector himself, was absent tonight. Higgs had nothing to inspect. The engine chugged, and the train creaked into motion. From their place of concealment behind the cars, the Barnetts saw Higgs pay the Mexicans, who ran to catch up with the train.

Higgs came and put his foot on the running board of his sedan.

"Well," he said to Sam, "that's done. The railroad won't suspect this shipment until Barnett and your brother start to squawk, and maybe not then. By that time, it will be too late." He laughed disagreeably, through his long nose.

"Hope not," Sam said. "To tell the

truth, Higgs, I cuss the day I ever met you—but it's too late to think about that now."

"You're damn right," Higgs snapped. He climbed into the car and fumbled for the ignition key. "I'm pulling out. You'll get your share, and no one will suspect you as long as you keep your mouth shut."

"Which is more, inspector," Mike said, thrusting his head above the body of the car, "than you can say for yourself!"

At the same moment, Ol' Man Barnett stepped in front of Sam. Both Mike and his father had their guns drawn. There was a moment of deep, startled silence, broken only by the rumble of the departing train. Higgs and Sam slowly raised their arms.

"Well," Higgs finally said, "pretty smart, aren't you? Got us red handed. What are you going to do about it?"

"You'll be surprised," Mike told him. "A Mexican got one year a few weeks back for stealing one cow. At that rate, you oughta get three hundred, but seeing as that ain't possible, and there can't be no justice nohow, we thought maybe we'd let you both go."

"Witty, too," Higgs said. "Sam got you all wrong. Said you were too lazy to worry about."

"That was unneighborly of you, Sam," Mike said reproachfully. "But I won't hold it against you if you do as I say. If you're convicted, all the ranchers in this county will get to suspecting each other again, and there'll be war in less than a month. Also, we figure it would be pretty tough for Bert, who's a special friend of ours. So we're letting you go, Sam, and the only way we can do that is to let Higgs get away, too. But Higgs has got to take the blame by clearing out of the country, and not coming back!"

Higgs grunted. "What if I refuse?" he asked. "You can't run me out and expect me to keep quiet, see? You haven't got any more on me than you have on Sam."

"Sam's supposed to be sick," Mike reminded the inspector. "If he's smart, he's going home pronto an' get sick."

He pulled the handkerchief-wrapped piece of barbed wire from his pocket and held it in front of Higgs, the two ends together.

"Both those cuts are chewed in the same way," Mike explained patiently, "the only difference being that you made one last night—and I made the other this morning, with your pliers. You're going to give me those pliers before you go. They are rotten pliers, Higgs, and cut crooked, leaving a trade mark on the wire same as the rifling of a gun does on a bullet."

"Oh," said Ol' Man Barnett, "is that ballistics?"

"Yeah," Mike grinned. "You might call it that."

Higgs considered a minute. "All right," he said finally. "You win."

Mike took his gun, along with the pliers, and then he gave the inspector his ignition key.

"Now," he advised, "beat it—an' drive like hell! This has to sound like a getaway, see? And don't forget that nobody'll miss you if you don't come back!"

SAM got the same advice while Mike helped him replace the spark-plug wires. Then the two cars started out, racing madly down the rutty road, while Mike and his father fired shots into the air. Then the Barnetts ran to the livery stable. The train, just beyond the deserted town, had come to a halt. There were shots as the two machines rattled past. The street and the tracks were widely separated, so that there was little danger of Sam's car being recognized. Mike found a horseshoe nail in the old stable and forced it into a rear tire with Higgs' pliers.

"Now," he said, "we have an excuse

for not following. Let's catch the train and put the run on those Mexicans."

The train crew had been convinced, although somewhat forcibly, that the cattle did not belong to the men who were shipping them. Maddux, proud with this success, was inclined to be bitter over the escape of Higgs and his unknown companion.

"Too darn much seamanship in this here cow country," he complained.

Bert Sanford was satisfied. For him, the important thing was the recovery of the steers, and that had been accomplished.

"I ain't hankerin' for more trouble," he said, "an' there'd be plenty if we had to go to trial." He turned to Mike. "I've been tryin' to figure out how you knew it was Higgs."

"Too long a story," Mike said.

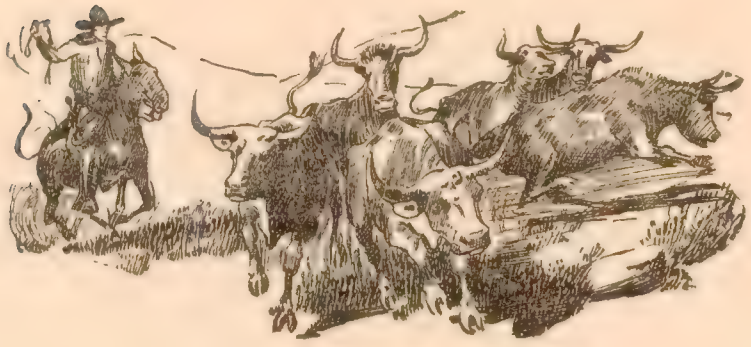
"Or why you cut off that piece of barbed wire," Maddux added. "That was real intelligent."

"That," Mike grinned, "was to make a back scratcher."

"You lazy cuss!"

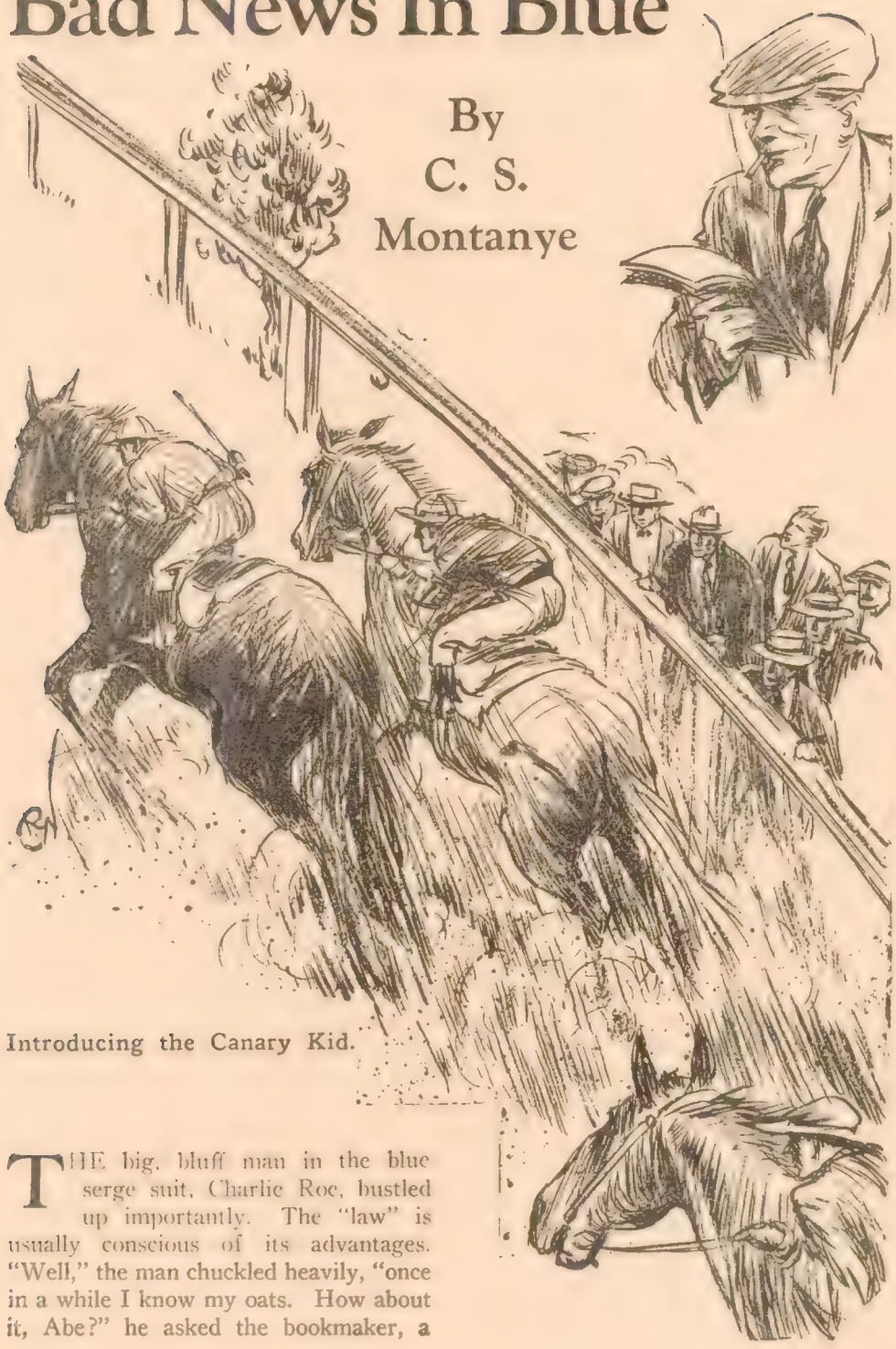
Ol' Man Barnett chuckled.

"It's convenient," he said, winking at Mike. Then he began to snort. "C'mon! C'mon! Let's get goin'. Gotta put these cows to bed. They was up all last night, an' now again to-night. They'll be so wore out an' lean at this rate that we won't get a dollar each for 'em!"



Bad News In Blue

By C. S. Montanye



Introducing the Canary Kid.

THE big, bluff man in the blue serge suit, Charlie Roe, bustled up importantly. The "law" is usually conscious of its advantages. "Well," the man chuckled heavily, "once in a while I know my oats. How about it, Abe?" he asked the bookmaker, a

dapper, slim little man. A pace away, the "Canary Kid" saw something not unlike a fleeting expression of pain cross Abe's face.

"I'll say you do, Mr. Roe," replied the bookie.

"I'm bad news in blue! Every one finds that out sooner or later." He whisked out a silk handkerchief and mopped his brow. "What have you got on the cuff now, Abe?"

The bookie consulted several loose sheets of memoranda. "You're in me for three grand."

"I'll kick back one of it in the fifth hop," answered Roe. He leaned confidentially forward, his voice pitched in an unintelligible key: "Right on the beak—understand?"

A minute later he was pushing through the Saturday-afternoon crowd that had come to Empire City on the "hilltop," for the get-away-day card. There would be no metropolitan racing until September, when the horses returned to Belmont. The Spa loomed ahead with its month of waters, pretty women, fashionable clubhouse parties, gaming rooms by night and rich purses. The Canary Kid watched the man in blue disappear. He glanced down at his penciled program. Once more his eyes narrowed at the name of the colt in the fourth race. This horse was Channing Westervelt's entry. This was going to be a lucky day.

Coming up from Times Square on the bus, the Canary Kid imagined he had a hunch. Perhaps it was because Westervelt, the young millionaire and sportsman, so nearly resembled himself. On three consecutive Saturdays he had glimpsed Channing Westervelt on the porch of the clubhouse. Like himself, the other was tall and blond, with a pink-and-white complexion and the trick of wearing smart clothes.

The Canary Kid frowned. Black Satin was the young sportsman's entry in the handicap. Was there anything in his present hunch? The Canary Kid asked himself, did a chance resemblance to an elegant spendthrift justify him in wagering all or part of the eighty dollars in his wallet?

"What's the price on Black Satin, Abe?"

"Five to two. Seven to ten a place. One to three show," the little bookie informed him.

"Big hearted to-day, aren't you?"

"Try and do better," the other replied succinctly.

"Give me fifty bucks' worth on the nostrils," the Canary Kid requested. "Nobody'll ever wear diamonds playing favorites." When the bookie made a note of the transaction, the Canary Kid flipped open his cigarette case. "By the way, who is the big boy in navy blue? I'll bet a whistle went with that suit. You called him Roe."

"That's right—Charlie Roe. He must have been born under a Christmas tree. A hard-working fella can't get nowheres with him. He's playing sure shots—get his info out of the feed box."

"A capper?"

The bookie nodded his head. "Don't fool yourself. Roe blasts his wise stuff right out of trainers and owners. You can't tell me. It's a gift!" He laughed. "I wish he'd give it back. Guess what he always says when I try and pump him?"

The Canary Kid glanced in the direction of the lawn. Joe Traill was waiting for him somewhere near the rail. It still lacked twenty minutes of post time for the fourth race. He flicked a lighter for his cigarette and inhaled. He looked haughtily at the bookie.

"I'll bite, Abe. What does the big boy say when you ask him, 'How come?' "

The little bookmaker slipped his papers in his coat pocket. "The other day, I says, 'Who's feeding you the artichokes, Mr. Roe?' Well, he laughs and says, 'I do get the right word, don't I,

Abe?' I says, 'I'll tell the world!' Then he laughs and answers: 'Listen. I'll slip you a tip because you're a square little somebody, Abe. Any one can cuddle up to the feed-box dope. It's a cinch.' This stops me for a minute or two. 'How do you mean?' I asks, and all he says is, 'Save a guy from drowning some time when you haven't anything better to do.' What does it sound like to you?"

The Canary Kid fingered his green cravat which harmonized so perfectly with his gray flannels. "Code! Funny, I sort of placed Roe as a square-toe."

The bookmaker looked up at him swiftly. "Him a cop? I'm laughing all over. Where'd you get that bright idea?"

"Don't know. One of my bright inspirations, I guess."

"Trade it for a celluloid collar," the bookmaker advised, "and throw a lighted match at it. If he's a dick I'm an opera star!"

THE Canary Kid made a leisurely way across the lawn. Traill, undersized, wizened and shabby, loomed up out of the crowd. He resembled a typical race-track tout, but the Canary Kid knew that Traill had nothing in common with the sport of kings save the opportunities it afforded to mark out a heavy winner or some woman whose jewels looked real.

In the vernacular of his underworld associates, Joe Traill was "a leather weeder, con man, and grifter." In fact, he was a cheap little crook.

"Get a bet down, Kid?" he inquired.

"Yes."

"A dinge from the Butler outfit," Traill continued, "was chinning with a swipe up at the paddock. According to him, it's all High Flyer in the next romp. A twenty-to-one shot. You didn't happen to get a ton of 'at?"

"I laid fifty on Black Satin to win," the Canary Kid told him precisely.

Traill's thin lips mirrored an ironic smile.

"Still playing the Westervelt goats, eh? You and your hunches, Kid! Just because you happen to look like that big shot——"

The sudden pressure of the Canary Kid's hand on his thin arm silenced him abruptly.

"That's enough!"

"Can't you ever take a joke? I'm only throwing bouquets at you!" Traill's tone was conciliatory. "Say, if I had a front like you I'd be in the dough—on the level. And what do you do when I hand you a compliment—try and break my arm. What a pal!"

The Canary Kid shouldered a way to the rail. Distantly the brazen notes of a bugle sounded, and eight mincing thoroughbreds appeared and started their parade to the post. The Canary Kid noted the Westervelt entry headed the procession, a black colt with a gleaming coat. Its jockey wore the young sportsman's lavender-and-old-rose colors. The eight horses moved toward the distant barrier.

"I should have put the whole eighty on him," the Canary Kid thought.

Beside him, Trail edged in closer. "What a lousy track. Only meant for exercise boys. Listen. This layout was intended for trotting horses. I remember my old man bringing me up here as a kid. No admission, you just walked in, helped yourself. The turtles were hitched to rigs with bicycle wheels so——"

THE Canary Kid glanced at the clubhouse. Channing Westervelt this afternoon was conspicuous by his absence. His expensive automobile was not in its usual place. Westervelt was not present to see Black Satin run in the handicap. Probably, the Canary Kid mused, Westervelt was yachting off Oyster Reef, down on Long Island, where he had a summer place.

A sudden shout directed his gaze back along the track. The barrier had been sprung, and the field was away. Bunched, in a shifting haze of dust and color, they thundered past. The distance was one mile and an eighth. It took them around the oval track and would bring the winner across the wire, not a dozen feet away from where Traill and the Kid stood.

"High Flyer two lengths to the good at the three-quarter pole! Looks like he's coasting along!" Joe Traill's voice sounded through the shouts and cries. "You can't tie the smokes when it comes to the inside, feed-box dope!"

The mile, and then the stretch. High Flyer had chucked it. Three horses, running with the same ground-devouring strides, thundered out of the closely bunched field. The jockeys stood in their stirrups. Whips rose and fell. The roar of the crowd deepened into a hysterical, pleading volume. The fire of hoofs announced the finish in front of the judges' stand and the satisfied acclaim vented upon a winning choice.

"Black Satin in the last nod!" some one to the right of the Canary Kid cried. "Did you see the ride the boy put up? One of those old Sande finishes. Pick 'em up and put 'em down!"

The Canary Kid buttoned his jacket and smiled at Traill. "Bum hunch? My lady of fortune is beginning to smile again."

The small crook's face darkened. "Meaning you're not going to Saratoga?"

"Meaning I shall stay here in town and see Nicholas Kane at six."

"You're off your nut!" Traill growled.

The Canary Kid shrugged. "Possibly. However, at the moment I am more interested in some miniatures in jeweled frames, right here in town. Saratoga can wait." He smiled thinly. "Five-to-two favorites won't pay the overhead at the Spa. You know," he reminded Traill, "how much I dislike cheap hotels, bad food, and the pinch-penny stuff. No, I'll wait to hear what Nick has to say. Possibly I'll run up later."

"In your big boat?" Traill sneered.

"Perhaps. What's the mater with you to-day, Joe? Not in a very affable humor. You didn't happen to have a few dollars riding on High Flyer?"

"Yes, I did. A couple of tens," the other retorted. "Now I don't get a berth in the sleeper. I sit up all night in a day coach. On the level, whoever got anywhere, listening to swipes?"

The Canary Kid laughed. "Not you, at least. Joe, I'm going back to town. I'm saying good-by here. If the mood moves me, I might see you at Saratoga within a fortnight; if not, let us part with a dash of advice. Keep your fingers out of strange pockets and brush your teeth before retiring. By so doing you will retain your freedom and health."

"On the level?"

The Canary Kid consulted his watch. "By sprinting," he murmured, "I may make the four-fifteen bus."

"What a pal!" Joe Traill mumbled, but the young man who wore his gray flannels with the jaunty elegance of a millionaire was already out of earshot.

MANHATTAN simmered in the declining July afternoon. Times Square, when the Canary Kid stepped from the bus, was wilted. Traffic seemed to go at a slower pace. The theater crowds were swelling the sluggish tide of pedestrians moving north and south.

The Canary Kid walked three blocks up Longacre; turning west, he reached the small hotel where, since the middle of June, a third-floor rear room had been his. It possessed that most cherished asset, a bathroom boasting a shower. The Canary Kid loitered in its cool, drenching rain. As he dressed, putting gray flannel aside for tan serge, he was certain that New York in sum-

mer was an attractive spot if one had good clothes, money, and a shower.

With a cigarette the Kid now lounged comfortably before the open window and considered the appointment made with Nicholas Kane. Kane, the custodian of an underworld fence and a man whose mind was a scrapbook of information, promised something of interest. The Canary Kid smiled retrospectively. His luck was on its up and up, and he had Nick Kane's tip.

At half past five the Canary Kid took a taxi through the Park, out the Seventy-second Street gate and into a neighborhood beyond the border of the thoroughfare Joe Traill referred to as the Rue de Ritz. Here the cluttered, untidy side streets have nothing in common with Park Avenue, only four or five blocks away.

When his taxi stopped, the Canary Kid paid his fare and went down a flight of rusty stairs to a small basement shop littered with furniture, battered musical instruments, rolls of carpet and bedding, and boxes of musty books. A second-hand furniture store, was Nicholas Kane's "front."

A bell jangled when the Canary Kid pushed the door wide and stepped into the perennial twilight. In all of his visits it seemed impossible to grow accustomed to its moldy odor. The dust and grime offended his fastidious senses. So did the bent, shirt-sleeved, drab man who stepped out of the rear shadows and shuffled forward. This Nicholas Kane wore a distrustful, tight-lipped face and a collarless shirt. His eyes were cold and noncommittal.

"Sit down, Kid," he invited.

The Canary Kid spread a handkerchief across the wooden seat of a chair. Kane smiled faintly.

"Well, it's six o'clock, and I'm here, anxious," the Canary Kid declared, "to hear what you have to say."

"It's plenty!" The man bent over and touched his knee with a long, crooked forefinger. "You only know it's ivory miniatures, old heirlooms, in frames set with jewels?"

"That's all, Nick."

"Jessup told me about them first. Jessup used to be a butler there. Was a butler until the girl's wedding. He tried to get his hands on a string of pearls and only skipped out with a minute to spare. Now he's stony—without enough guts to try and turn it himself. He was in here yesterday, wanting me to hand him fifty dollars on account. Fifty dollars, with the miniatures untouched. What does he think I am—some kind of a fool?"

"What did you do?"

"I told him to come back to-morrow. He stayed an hour, sketching plans. I have them here, for you, if you'll go in on it with me."

The Canary Kid narrowed his eyes. "I want the low-down. You talk about miniatures and floor plans, butlers and a fifty-fifty split, but I want to know whose house it is, how much the miniatures are worth, how much risk."

NICHOLAS KANE inched his chair closer. "The miniatures belong to Westervelt—Channing Westervelt, and they're in a secretary—in the bottom drawer—of the house on Seventy-eighth Street. Young Westervelt's away, down at Oyster Reef, and Jessup had a duplicate key made for every room in the place. You walk in, help yourself, and walk out——"

The Canary Kid's mouth tightened. Westervelt! His thoughts of the earlier afternoon came back to him. Fortune or Fate, he knew not which, apparently was intent upon weaving the threads of his destiny with those of the man he superficially resembled. Picking up the pencil-lined drawings Kane laid beside him, the Canary Kid held them to the street light filtering in. Absently he remarked Jessup's notations, the ex-butler's commentaries.

"The miniatures," the man beside him murmured, "are family portraits, done by Verneuil, the French master—the man who did the miniature of Queen Victoria. They're not worth much outside of the frames. I don't intend to break them up. We'll hold them here until Westervelt offers a big enough reward for their return. You see? It isn't like a string of diamonds, a bracelet or loose stones. The householder takes the insurance money and lets it go at that. But miniatures are different, family stuff. You can't replace it. When it's gone, it's gone. Money won't bring it back, unless there's enough of it offered."

The Canary Kid listened without comment. He knew enough of Nicholas Kane to understand the other spoke only of what he knew to be accurate facts. More than once Kane had supplied lucrative hints. He reflected, his glance intent upon the drawings that things which seemed so simple often proved to be the most difficult. But, after all, when luck is with you, why not lean on luck.

"A fifty-fifty split, Nick?"

The man nodded. "Exactly. As usual."

"But if it's such a cinch——"

"You've got the front, the class," Kane pointed out. "I've seen pictures of Westervelt. You're him—in miniature. If anything came up you could bluff and talk your way out of it."

The Canary Kid reached for his cigarettes. "I'll swing it," he decided.

THE city's heat was tempered by a faint, stirring breeze after the twilight merged with evening. The Canary Kid, emerging from a bench in the Park, where he had idly viewed the traffic parade, looked at the luminous dial of his watch. It lacked something of being eleven o'clock—an hour from midnight, on an evening when the city had no wish to return indoors.

He walked leisurely up Fifth Avenue, turned east at Seventy-eighth Street and at once was in a quiet, aristocratic neighborhood, where private houses were boarded up for the summer. On the south side of the block, five buildings from the avenue beyond, the Westervelt house stood, unboarded and with lightless windows.

The Canary Kid eyed it with some curiosity as he went past. The house had been in the Westervelt family for many years.

The stoop of brownstone led to a double-doored vestibule. The outer doors swung easily inward. The inner door yielded to the first of Jessup's keys. With a breath of satisfaction the Canary Kid closed it after him and took stock of his surroundings. Shadowy rooms were on the right. A suit of armor stood rigidly on guard in the middle distance, and to the left a circular flight of stairs lost themselves in the murk of the landing above.

The lower floor contained nothing of any particular value. His business lay within a second-floor library, where stood an antique walnut secretary. With Nicholas Kane's floor plans in his mind, the intruder soon located the proper room. A wall switch kindled a chandelier overhead.

The blaze of light revealed a massive secretary on the north side of the room.

The Canary Kid shot a swift glance about before he sauntered over to inspect the bottom drawer. A turn of the second of Jessup's keys, a neatly tagged key, and the drawer slid open, disclosing among other things a large mahogany box, resembling a cigar humidor.

The Kid raised its lid and found himself contemplating at least a dozen small chamois bags, methodically laid out in rows. The first of these, as well as the others, secreted an oval ivory miniature. Its dull-gold frame was set with precious stones. The Canary Kid re-

placed the miniature in its chamois bag and the bag in its mahogany box. Keeping the box he closed the drawer, straightened up, turned—and went suddenly stiff.

A young man lounged in the doorway, a slender, tall young man with blond hair, blue eyes, and a hand fondling an automatic revolver. Channing Westervelt in person! The Canary Kid recognized the other immediately. His identity brought no particular satisfaction. It clearly explained those unlooked for details which marred the simplest of tasks. Young Westervelt, yachting off Oyster Reef that afternoon, had exchanged the salty cool of the countryside for the sultry heat of Manhattan.

"Please," the Canary Kid murmured affably, "be careful with the artillery. It might go off all of a sudden. Then think how uncomfortable you'd be with me ruining this splendid rug."

"It will go off all of a sudden," Westervelt replied, equally as affable, "if you don't do as I say."

"Just what is that?"

"Place the box on the table, then turn around, with your hands above your head, and stand with your back to the wall, so I can search you."

"It really isn't necessary," declared the Kid. "I haven't a weapon. However, you're at liberty to look, of course."

He set the mahogany box down carefully on the table, obediently fulfilling the order. In so doing, the Canary Kid picked out a certain spot along the wainscoted wall. The man in the doorway took no heed of its significance. The Canary Kid laughed under his breath.

"Now, then," Channing Westervelt continued briskly, "we'll stage a little playlet, entitled 'Patient Waiting.' I might add I took the precaution of telephoning the police before I came downstairs."

THE Canary Kid considered the other with unfeigned interest. At the racetrack Westervelt was of about the same height and build, the same appearance. At close range the resemblance was not at all marked. Had it not been for blond hair and blue eyes Westervelt's likeness would have been decidely negligible.

"You telephoned the police?"

"They promised," the young millionaire declared, "to send some detectives over immediately. They should, I imagine, arrive at any moment."

"Promptness," the Canary Kid lamented, "is not one of their virtues. And, holding my hands up is not what might be called comfortable. With your permission——"

Westervelt shook his head.

"As you are, please!"

The Canary Kid pressed his shoulder to the wall. The protruding button of the light switch made its presence known in no uncertain manner. He mentally calculated the distance separating him from the young man with the gun. Then he pressed hard and smothered a sibilant exclamation, as the lights in the chandelier winked out. Nimbly he darted to one side.

Westervelt's trigger clicked impotently. In the next breath the Canary Kid had him by the throat. He dug his thumb into the vulnerable spot near the windpipe and held him in merciless, throttling hold until he felt Westervelt grow limp. Now he let him drop to the floor, switched back the lights, and strained his ears. A car entered the quiet street outside and was coming to a stop. Swiftly the Canary Kid whipped out his silk handkerchief, bound Westervelt's jaw securely, and shot a glance about. A circle of curtain cord served to pin the unresisting arms of his victim stoutly behind his back. The Canary Kid threw open the door of a closet. But before he bundled him into it he made a hasty inspection of Westervelt's

pockets. A wallet, some letters, keys, a roll of money.

It was when he had transferred the last of them to his own pockets that the eerie stillness of the house was disturbed by the staccato ring of a doorbell. The Canary Kid produced a pocket mirror and smoothed his hair. With a pull at his cravat, he buttoned his coat, as the bell continued its metallic summons, lighted a cigarette, and descended the stairs.

The door opened, and three men entered the foyer—sharp-eyed men, with questioning glances and bluff, blunt methods of approach. Upon the trio the Canary Kid bent a quizzical, wondering look.

"Is there something I can do for you gentlemen?" he began, with the proper amount of puzzled curiosity.

"Who are you?" the spokesmen for the three began. Then, before the query could be answered, he continued: "I'm Dugan from headquarters. A call came in about fifteen minutes ago from Westervelt over here. He said——"

The Canary Kid's quizzical look changed to one of amiable amusement.

"Somebody's been playing a practical joke on you boys. I think I know who it is. I'm mighty sorry you were troubled. I'm Channing Westervelt, and I'm quite certain I did not send for you."

The plain clothes man's cold eyes wandered over him. "Young Westervelt, eh?" He grunted. "What are you doing in town?"

The Canary Kid returned his look. "I fail to see what business it is of yours. As a matter of fact, I ran in from Oyster Reef a couple of hours ago. Look here, are you doubting my identity?"

He laughed with genuine relish, reaching for and producing Westervelt's wallet. Its transparent left face contained an automobile license. The Canary Kid let Dugan look at it before, with the bored amusement of one making the identification complete, he carelessly displayed letters addressed to Westervelt's Long Island residence and New York office. Dugan's gaze lost some of its suspicion.

"A joke, you say? No joke on a night like this—with a pinochle game going on, Mr. Westervelt."

"I imagine not." The Canary Kid's smile was sympathetic. "Here's a little something you can divide with your two men and put in the pot—with my compliments."

Westervelt's roll of money contained several twenty-dollar bills. The Canary Kid thumbed off three of them and handed them to Dugan to distribute. The detective grunted.

"Well, this is nice of you, Mr. Westervelt."

"Not at all. Sorry you were chased out on a false alarm. By the way, Dugan, just keep a sharp eye on the house while I'm down on Long Island, and I won't forget you. I've a collection of miniatures I never seem to remember to put away, and, of course, I don't want them stolen."

"Trust me, Mr. Westervelt. Good night and thanks again. All right, Joe? Let's get back."

THE Canary Kid watched them return to their car and chug off down the street. He lighted another cigarette and went back to the library. The closet, once he opened its door, showed a perspiring and acutely conscious Channing Westervelt.

"Sorry," the Canary Kid murmured. "I've been entertaining the gentlemen you telephoned. They've gone now. I gave them special orders to watch this house carefully and reimbursed each with a double ten spot. Sixty dollars of your money. I'll leave the door slightly ajar, so you can get some air and, just to show my heart's in the right place, I'll put in a call when I'm safely

away. Don't worry, I'll send some one around to release you."

Westervelt's eyes followed him, as the Canary Kid picked up the mahogany box containing the miniatures. There was a small hand bag on the shelf of the closet. The box fitted into it, and the Canary Kid snapped it shut. Then with a word to Westervelt he switched off the lights and let himself out of the library, went down the stairs and stopped short, as the thunderous bell rang again.

The Canary Kid narrowed his eyes. Dugan and his friends returning? Who —what?

A hanging lamp lighted the foyer. The Canary Kid turned to the front door, swung its bronze knob over, and frowned at the man in the vestibule, who greeted him with all the geniality of an old friend.

"Hello, Mr. Westervelt. Mind if I come in? I was just passing by and happened to notice the light upstairs. I want to thank you for——"

For the second time that day the Canary Kid found himself confronting a big, bluff man in a blue serge suit, the same man who had given Abe, the little bookmaker, near heart failure with his winning bets. He stepped in, and the next instant the Canary Kid dropped the bag he carried and lifted his hands quickly, stretching for the vaulted ceiling overhead. The round mouth of the police revolver moved an inch closer to him.

"If you don't mind——"

"Not at all. I'm Roe from the precinct two blocks east—a square-toe, a dick. Neat the way you fooled Dugan, but not so neat now, big boy. Channing Westervelt is one of my friends, ever since I hauled him out of the deep and briny when his speed boat went blooie. You know," he confided, picking up the bag the Canary Kid had dropped, "I love to grab you slick birds when you're all set for a nifty get-away. I'm bad news in blue to you guys. You all find it out—sooner or later, too!"

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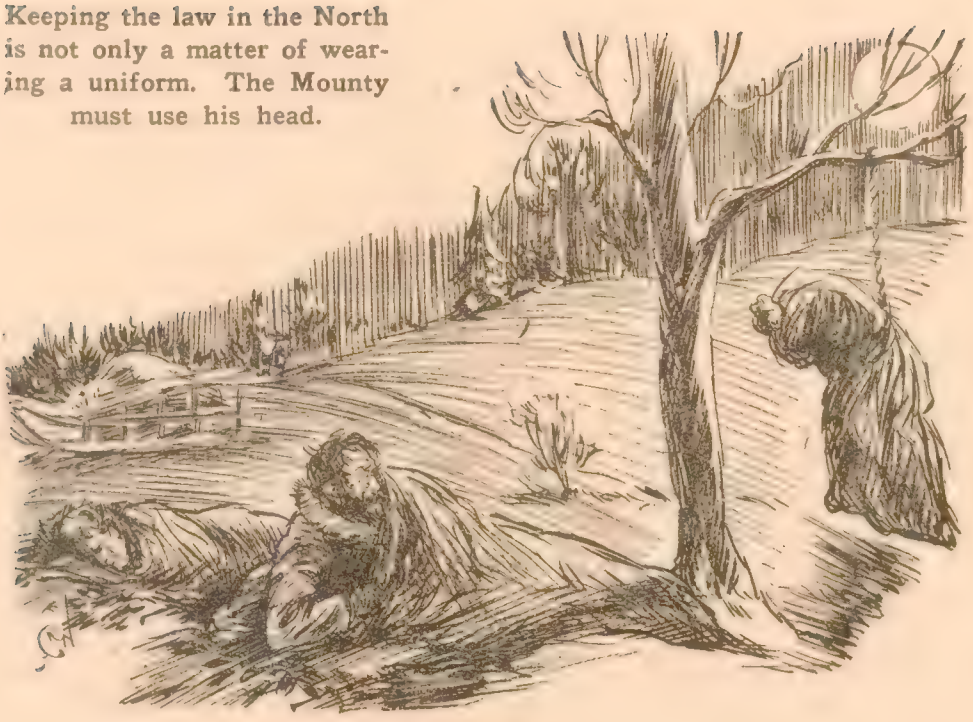


Danse Macabre

By F. B. Watt

SIX hard days on the trail had done much to put "Shrub's" conscience to sleep, but it rose and hit him like a blow between the eyes when he rounded the familiar bend in the river that brought his cabin into view. There was a thin spiral of smoke rising from the chimney, a square of soft, rose-colored light marked the single window the building possessed.

His lead dog sniffed the crisp air and uttered a single, sharp bark. Like an oft-repeated echo came a shrill, staccato chorus from the direction of the cabin. Some one, obviously, was paying a call or using the shack for the night in the free-and-easy camaraderie of the Northern traveler.

Who the devil could be using the cabin? No native, he was certain. He didn't get along with the Chippewans or Dogribs. As for whites, he and "Slag" were the most remote on the river. And it couldn't be Slag. Slag was dead.

He pulled up before the cabin, marked a train of dogs chained in the shelter of his woodpile, and then drove his own beasts into their corral. Fighting down the temptation to investigate the house immediately, he walked casually to his fish cache and filled his arms with frozen, sticklike conies. He returned to the dwelling unhurriedly, retrieving his self-possession with every step. He kicked open the door and stepped into the light.

By the stove, a stranger bent over a merrily sizzling moose steak. He had removed his outer clothes, revealing a khaki shirt and blue trousers with the broad yellow stripe of the Mounted Police down the seams. For an instant the conies rattled in Shrub's arms. Then a harsh laugh rose in his throat—to be choked off sharply. What the devil was the matter with him, anyway? This policeman was here in answer to his own message, sent south by a passing Indian two days after Slag had died.

THE officer raised a smooth, ruddy face and grinned a welcome. He was no more than a boy for all his six feet two of rugged body. Shrub experienced a great wave of relief. He had expected that Corporal Wilder, the dour-featured, nosey bloodhound he had met at the fort, would be the one to investigate the tragedy. Apparently, however, Slag's death had been considered of little importance—a bit of routine investigation with which to break in a new recruit.

"Hello," said the policeman. "Are you Shrub?"

"The same," admitted the trapper agreeably.

"I'm Lytlewaite," announced the stranger, offering his hand. "Came in to go through the motions of investigating old Slag's death. You sent word of it, didn't you?"

"Yes," assented Shrub. "Apparently the poor chap——"

"Let's wait until we've got our teeth into this," the constable cut in, indicating the steak. "Knocked the brute over about fifty miles back."

Shrub dumped his conies into a pail and placed them close to the fire, where they could thaw.

"A chap's got to get a long way off the beaten track if he wants the fur these days," he said. "At that, Slag's line was the last on the river."

"Get out the tools," ordered Lytlewaite, apparently not the least bit interested in old Slag, "the feast is ready for serving."

The officer reminded Shrub of a big, overgrown youngster—a mass of brainless, animal spirit. It seemed incongruous that he should be a member of the grim, tenacious force of which lean-jawed Corporal Wilder had always, as far as Shrub was concerned, been the perfect example.

"You're new to this part of the country, aren't you?" the trapper suggested.

"Uh-huh," assented Lytlewaite, his mouth full.

"Like your new post?"

"It's not much different from the last, as far as I can see—same old chilly patrols, same old useless inquests. Keeping law anywhere in the North is only a matter of wearing the uniform."

THE policeman, his plate empty, left the table and stretched out on his sleeping bag with a luxurious sigh.

"This is the only decent hour in the day," commented the officer, without bothering to direct his eyes in his companion's direction. "A good meal, a smoothly drawing pipe, a warm spot to stretch out in, and not a worry in the world. Aren't you going to feed your dogs?"

The latter sentence, delivered in an offhand way, brought Shrub up with a start. Instinctively he felt that no detail of his cabin or himself was escaping the eyes of his guest, even though the latter's senses seemed to be centered in his stomach.

"By golly, I almost forgot them," he said, jumping to his feet. "It's not so easy to remember that some one else is hungry when your own belly's full."

He lifted the pail of fish and stepped into the open, taking his time as he fed his happily snarling train. It had turned decidedly cold as darkness had settled, and the brittle air assisted him in clear thought. There was nothing about

which to get panicky. The policeman was a numskull, one of the pretty boys of the new force. It was his own imagination that was causing him to see danger behind Lytlewaite's healthily stupid exterior. If there had been any suspicion of foul play in the case of Slag's death, Corporal Wilder would have been on the job himself.

Refreshed and easy in his mind again, Shrub reëntered the cabin. Lytlewaite was still sprawled on his bag—blowing smoke rings at the ceiling. With the trapper's return, however, he got to his feet, stretched himself with an evident enjoyment, and sat down to the table with a pencil and notebook before him.

"We might as well get this business over with, I suppose," he announced. "Imagine, weeks on the trail for a written page or two about an old codger who might never have lived for all that it interested any one. Oh, well, I suppose I'd be out of a job if it wasn't for such hocus-pocus. What do you think happened to him? Any chance of locating the body?"

"I think not—in fact, I'm sure you can't," said Shrub. "There's no doubt that he threw himself in the open water above the falls. I dropped in on him six weeks ago, and found his dogs lying dead outside the cabin. They had all been shot. I knew what had happened right away, even before I followed Slag's tracks to the edge of the open water. He had been down in the dumps all winter, and had talked about pushing off. I hadn't taken him seriously, of course."

"What was the matter with him?"

"Oh, things had been going badly with him." There was regret in Shrub's voice. "He'd been ill off and on. Twice I had to cover his line for him. To make matters worse, a wolverene started to make the round of his traps and tore up what looked like some lovely pelts. Trapping was the only thing in the world that mattered to Slag. The trouble started to hurt his pride, I think, even though I picked up two of the nicest black-fox skins you ever saw when I was going around for him. I've got 'em here for safe-keeping."

SHRUB unlocked a cupboard high on the wall and produced a pair of pelts that shimmered in the lamplight. The policeman ran his hand over the glossy fur, which seemed to cling to his fingers.

"Lovely things," he grunted, "though I don't know much about them. If I'd been you, I'd have pocketed them after you found he'd done himself in, and claimed they'd come from your own traps."

Shrub's scandalized eyebrows rose.

"Slag was my friend," he protested, "about the only one I had. I would as soon have stolen something from my own mother. Lord knows, he caught little enough this year, as it was, while I was having all the luck."

"D'you get any of these?" asked the policeman.

"No," admitted Shrub, "but I've had a good catch of other fur."

"Did you bring the rest of the old boy's stuff with you from his cabin?"

"Just the fur," replied the trapper. "The rest of the things could be identified, and no native would touch them—even if he raked up the courage to enter a dead man's home."

"How far is it to the cabin from here?"

"About six miles."

"I'll trot down and give it the once-over to-morrow," announced Lytlewaite. "Might as well make a pass at looking for the body, so as to round out my report."

"You can save your time on that account," said Shrub quickly. "There's no open water for as far down the river as any one has traveled after you pass the rapids near Slag's place. He's gone for good."

"Well, that's all right with me," answered the constable easily. "I never did appreciate the undertaking profession. You've got nothing further to add to the report?"

"No," said Shrub definitely, "that's all I know—except that I spotted John Great Bear on his way to the fort, and sent the message with him that brought you here."

"Too bad," yawned the policeman. "If you'd waited until the spring, they'd probably have had enough sense to write 'suicide' after Slag's name, and let it go at that. Well, how about one more pipe?"

THE representative of the law again consigned himself to the floor, this time making complete preparations for a night's slumber.

"I'll go over to Slag's with you tomorrow if you wish," the trapper offered. "I know the lay of the land, and can probably save you time."

"Thanks a lot," replied the constable, "but I wouldn't think of it. You've been on the go enough, what with attending to two trap lines——"

"I haven't been paying any attention to Slag's since he died," interrupted Shrub with emphasis. "I just went around and sprung all the traps. It would have been a waste of fur, and cruelty to animals, to have left them set. Any decent trapper would have done the same."

"Quite so," assented Lytlewaite, commendation in his tone. "That's all the more reason why I shouldn't put you to additional trouble. After all, there's nothing for me to do except browse around a bit and take a photograph. I'll probably be back within a day's time. Good night."

Five minutes after he had laid aside his pipe, he was asleep. His breathing was as easy and as effortless as that of a healthy child. The very restfulness of the slumberer again aroused unreasonable apprehensions in the mind of Shrub. The absence of vigorous, gusty breathing in so large a chap was suspicious. His whole attitude suggested a man holding his breath and listening—listening cautiously through interminable minutes that lengthened into hours. Probably his eyes, hidden in the shadows of his sleeping bag, were open and marking every movement Shrub made. Not that the trapper was unduly active. He merely locked up the fox furs again, stoked the stove, and rolled into his bunk, where he lay rigid and wakeful for the remainder of the night.

Lytlewaite woke, as though aroused by a silent alarm, when the first streak of dawn drove the northern lights from the sky. It was obvious to the trapper, covertly watching his brisk movements, that there had been no sham to the policeman's easy slumber. Silently and with surprising speed, Lytlewaite garbed himself, ate a quick breakfast, and got his dogs into harness. Twenty minutes after he had arisen, the jingle of his train died away in the direction of Slag's cabin. Not until then, did Shrub close his eyes with success.

He woke in the early afternoon. The constable had not yet returned. It was probable that he would be in by dark, though. The trail to Slag's was broken and he should be able to make the run each way in an hour. That would give him plenty of time to make his cursory examination and take his photos. The signs of the tragedy were evident enough. Any one, even an unimaginative bullock like Lytlewaite, could read them in five minutes. There were the dead dogs—if the wolves had left anything of their frozen carcasses. There were the empty shells, ejected from the rifle that had brought them death. There was the rifle itself, with Slag's initials carved on the stock. There was the cabin, as neat as a pin, and speaking of an owner who believed in doing things in the most methodical

manner. Of course, there were no footprints down to the open water above the rapids, but that could hardly be expected. Falling snow had no respect for the convenience of officers of the law or any one else. It blotted out evidence on some occasions as readily as it provided it on others.

DESPITE the simplicity of his job, Lytlewaite failed to appear by evening—too lazy, apparently, to make a quick day's work of it. Shrub spent a restless night. The policeman was still downriver at the end of another twenty-four hours. Shrub hitched up his dogs and started down the trail, unable to bear the suspense longer. Halfway to Slag's, his reason returned. It would be an admission of a guilty conscience if he came tearing after the investigator, just because the latter had spent two days on the job.

The third and fourth days passed in a welter of mental agony. A new fear rose to shake the man further. Suppose Lytlewaite had fallen in the river in a futile search for Slag's body? What would be more natural than for the outside world to suspect that the policeman had been done away with in an attempt to prevent the discovery of a previous crime?

During the night, one of Shrub's dogs took to howling, not with the lusty venom of a half wolf, protesting a life of bondage, but with the low, moaning note of a house animal before a dwelling in which there was a serious illness. After an hour of attempting to ignore the wail, the trapper strode to the dog corral and administered a two-footed attack on the guilty beast that left it very little wind with which to carry on the ghastly serenade. Yet Shrub was scarcely back to the house before the howl again rose eerily into the night.

Shrub endured it until four o'clock in the morning. He pulled the blankets over his head until he almost suffocated, yet never finding relief for his ringing ears. Finally his control broke. Oaths sputtered from him like the discharge of fireballs from a Roman candle, as he grasped his rifle, and once more strode to the corral. The moaning dog stood out plainly enough beneath the stars, his head raised in a taut line toward the heavens. There was a sharp report, a flash of fire. A leaden pellet cut off the ghostly song in the brute's throat. The man paid no attention to the twitching carcass, nor was there any need. Sledge dogs are accomplished cannibals, and those in the corral, at the mercy of the distracted Shrub, had gone hungry for three days.

As dawn broke, the trapper succumbed to mental and physical weariness. When he again became aware of his surroundings, he found that it was mid-day, and that he was lying, fully clothed, on his bunk. From the direction of the river came the silvery tinkle of sleigh bells, barely audible to Shrub's alert ears. It had been the presentiment of an approaching crisis, rather than the actual sound, that had awakened him.

Standing in the doorway, he hailed Lytlewaite in a relieved voice, as the constable topped the bank and directed his train toward the woodpile. The officer waved a cheerful whip in return.

"Ready for grub if I get some ready?" demanded Shrub.

"Sure thing," replied the other. "I'll be in as soon as I get the hounds settled."

Shrub whistled as he worked about the stove. Well, the damn thing was over with. It had been proved to Lytlewaite's satisfaction that Slag had been an obvious suicide. Probably the lout had been taking his ease in the dead man's cabin for the past five days, resting his lazy body for a long trip back to the fort. Certainly he had discovered nothing of unusual interest. In the first place, there had been nothing to dis-

cover, and, in the second, he wouldn't have lost any time in letting Shrub know about it if there had been. Through the window, the trapper could see him unharnessing his dogs and chaining them up, pausing indolently to stroke one animal's head or to slap another affectionately over the hind quarters. Such actions were typical of him. A decent dog driver wouldn't touch an animal with anything softer than a six-foot thong.

HIS task finished, the policeman walked directly to the house. Silently, he pulled off his parka and took his place at the table. His boyish forehead was furrowed as he regarded the man sitting opposite him. Shrub's dark, bearded features reacted to the ominous frown almost instantly.

"What's up?" he questioned sharply.

"Oh, nothing very much," replied the constable, the puzzled expression turning to one of embarrassment, "but it's a bad break for you. I'm afraid you'll have to go back to the fort with me."

Shrub gripped the edge of the table desperately, and his hawklike nose quivered.

"You're arresting me?" he gasped.

Lytlewaite shrugged his great shoulders disparagingly.

"Not a bit of it," he said. "Why should I? It's only to protect you that I'm suggesting it. You see, there'll be bound to be a post-mortem and a full-sized inquest over Slag's body. You, having been the last man to see him alive, should be on the spot to knock on the head any silly rumors that might arise. They always do, worse luck, where a death occurs in the wilderness."

"That's true enough," agreed Shrub hollowly, "but how, when, and where are they going to produce Slag's body?"

"I found it yesterday," announced Lytlewaite. "It's out in the cariole."

"You're kidding me," accused the trapper harshly.

"Not a bit of it," replied the officer. "I must admit it was a stroke of luck locating him, but I deserved some reward for the work I put in searching. He was just at the foot of the rapids, hung up on a snag in a backwater. Had a hell of a time pulling him out with a grappling iron of my own making. He was frozen solid and coated with ice. Had probably been stranded on a rock farther up the rapids, and then been pushed off by a block of ice."

"He's in good shape, then?" suggested Shrub woodenly.

"Not bad, as drowned men go," admitted the policeman. "Of course, he'd had a bit of a shaking up going over the rapids, and was slightly battered. I didn't attempt to thaw him out, much less make an examination. That'll be a job for the doctor at the fort. By the way, will you give me a hand hoisting him up on the fish cache? We can't have the dogs nosing about him."

"Sure," assented Shrub mechanically.

THE corpse occupied the entire bottom of the cariole. Lytlewaite had utilized an old tent as a shroud, lashing it securely about the body with ropes. He grasped the tragic, gray bundle at the head and lifted the rigid form into a slanting position.

"Here," he ordered Shrub, "grab the feet. He's dashed heavy, what with the ice and all."

With evident distaste the trapper obeyed.

"Righto," continued the policeman. "When I say 'heave,' hoist him right over your head and up on the platform. One—two—three—heave!"

On the last word, Slag clattered up among the frozen conies, lying at right angles to the beams of suspended fish.

"Fine," exclaimed Lytlewaite heartily. "He'll be safe there until we get on the move. By Jove, man, you're trembling. That'll teach you to put on your parka when you go out."

"Uh-huh," mumbled Shrub. "Man can't be too careful even if he's used to the country. Say, it's going to be tough on me and the fur, too, if I have to go to the fort now."

"There's no doubt about that," commiserated the constable, "but it would probably be a lot tougher if you convinced the corporal that you were nervous about coming. There have been no end of innocent people sent to 'clink' just because they were nervous or stubborn. Why, it's not unbelievable that you'd find yourself suspected of murder. Of course, it's out of the question, but stranger things have happened."

Shrub's sudden fit of trembling ceased abruptly at the sound of the single, ugly word in Lytlewaite's speech.

"You're quite right," he said lowly. "I'll hunt up an Indian to go around and spring my traps. If I can find one, we'll start south in the morning."

"Good lad," approved the policeman.

That evening was much the same as the first one they had spent together. Their meal finished, Lytlewaite retired to his rude lounge on the floor, and to his pipe.

"You don't think," he demanded suddenly, "that there could have been any dirty work in connection with Slag, do you? No native with an axe to grind? It just struck me as strange that he should clean up on his dogs before he took his last walk."

"Nothing strange about that," explained the brooding man by the table. "Slag would never stand for unnecessary cruelty. Better to put the brutes out of their misery on the spot, than to let them starve to death."

"That's right," agreed Lytlewaite absently.

THERE was another long period of silence, broken only by the steady puffing of the constable's pipe. Shrub's eyes were drawn toward the window. A new moon was bathing the Northern forest in the intense light known only to the white wilderness. Stark in the foreground rose the fish cache, topped by the long, ominous bundle the men had placed there. Detesting the sight, yet fascinated by it, Shrub could not draw his eyes away until Lytlewaite's voice again broke in.

"How long had it been," he asked disinterestedly, "between the time you last made the rounds for Slag and the time you found him missing?"

"About two weeks," replied the trapper shortly.

"How was his health?"

"Better than it had been. He was able to get about again, but still had a grouch. I think his illness was mental rather than physical."

"Strange," muttered Lytlewaite.

"What's strange?" snapped Shrub.

"Oh, I'm only thinking out loud," said the officer, with a little laugh. "It just seemed funny that he wouldn't have sprung his own traps, seeing he hated cruelty and was preparing so methodically to step off the deep end. Of course, it's not evidence or anything like that, but it's an interesting point in psychology."

"What's psychology?" asked the other bluntly.

"A pastime for people with nothing better to do," yawned Lytlewaite, "and, occasionally, a labor-saving device for certain brands of work."

"What the devil are you talking about?" Shrub almost shouted.

"Damned if I know," came the constable's voice, muffled in his sleeping bag. "Lucky you were able to get that Nitchi to go around and spring your traps so soon. We'll start at daybreak. The faster we travel, the sooner you'll be back. Sweet dreams."

There were to be no dreams for Shrub—nor sleep, for that matter, other than an occasional, fitful doze. He was glad to rise long before daylight, armed

with the excuse that he wished to put the cabin in order, and prepare a last, well-cooked breakfast before hitting the trail. Lytlewaite remained in his bag until half an hour before they started, and, when he turned out, appeared to be as refreshed as his companion was weary.

Once again, as the cariole was loaded, Shrub had to apply his strength to the feet of the rocklike bundle atop the fish cache, assisting, like a conscripted undertaker, in fitting the body into the buckskin-walled interior of the sleigh.

"Just the same as slipping it into a coffin." The thought struck him with barbed force. To make it worse, Lytlewaite whistled a bar of ancient jazz while the transfer was being made.

ASSISTED by clear, cold weather and an undrifted trail, the policeman set up a stern pace from the moment the cariole slid out on the river. He drove his powerful team steadily, not forcing them beyond a reasonable limit, but keeping every trace taut as long as the rangy animals were on the move. He, himself, was tireless, his narrow trail shoes moving ahead at the ends of his long legs as effortlessly as well-oiled pistons. His body, with its customary lazy swing, seemed to be drawn easily ahead by an unseen force. It was too much for Shrub, tired even before he had slipped on his snowshoes. He began to lag after the first ten miles, and, at the constable's order, traveled the greater part of the day's run on the little platform behind the corpse.

"Too bad Slag can't appreciate what a funeral we're giving him," grinned Lytlewaite, without changing his stride. "It isn't every old codger who has a two-hundred-mile procession, complete with driver and groom."

Shrub glanced with a wan smile at the canvas-clad package, half buried beneath the other contents of the cariole, but essayed no answer.

They camped in the open that night, with forty miles of travel to their credit. The trapper made a clearing in the brush, and lit a fire, while Lytlewaite attended to the dogs and unloaded the sleigh. When everything was out except the grim bundle, the policeman slipped the noose of a rope about the upper part of it. Then he pushed the cariole beneath a tall spruce that flanked the camp.

"Hi, Shrub, give us a hand," he shouted.

Expressionlessly, his companion stood by, while he tossed the loose end of the rope over a lower branch of the tree, and caught it as it fell on the far side.

"One—two—three—heave!" chanted the policeman.

Gritting his teeth, Shrub lifted on the body, while the other pulled on the crude block and tackle. Slowly Slag rose until he swung sufficiently high above the ground to escape the attention of the most agile animal. Lytlewaite secured the rope about the tree trunk.

"Well," he said philosophically, "I don't suppose anything will trouble him."

The moon shone with the same brilliance as on the previous night. Not until he had climbed into his bag did Shrub notice that the tall spruce, with its grisly fruit hanging from a lower limb, stood directly between the camp and the baleful source of light. A sharply outlined, black shape, Slag rocked peacefully to every breath of wind, occasionally varying the stately dance with a slow, courtly turn of the body. Shrub's every sense cried out for sleep. He turned his head away and clamped his eyes shut until they ached. And then, some minutes later, he discovered that Slag was again in his line of vision, and that a monotonous, unhappy tune was echoing through his brain—to the beat of which the canvas parcel stepped its fantastic measure.

This kept up for four days, each of them identical. During the daylight hours there was the companionship of the Northern hearse, with Lytlewaite as a cheerful but relentless shadow in the background. During the hours of night there was the moon, acting as a spotlight for Slag's dance of death. The ironical part of it was that Shrub, with every fresh camp, was compelled to assist in setting the stage for the grim comedy that was robbing him of his sleep—and his reason.

ON the fifth night they stopped at a cabin within a day's run of the fort. The owner of the place, a trapper, was absent, and they had the house to themselves. It represented a haven to Shrub—a haven in which he would be rid of the featureless dancer, and be presented with an opportunity of obtaining a new grip on himself for the ordeal of the morrow. He chuckled inwardly as he assisted in hoisting Slag to the tree Lytlewaite had chosen for the night's sojourn.

They ate supper quickly, and lost no time in extinguishing the lamp and seeking their beds. It had been a hard day's going, even for the policeman. No sooner had Shrub's eyes become accustomed to the darkness, however, than they were attracted to the window. He started, but scarcely from surprise. Framed in the square of glass was the familiar form that had been driving him out of his mind—swaying, dipping, and turning with insolent abandon in the moonlight. Lytlewaite had chosen the tree well—great eye for dramatic effect. Strange, thought Shrub, that he hadn't seen through the policeman's plan before.

He turned from the window, but tonight Slag refused to give him even a moment of peace. His shadow, like a victim of the gibbet, was etched against the opposite wall in the square of reflected light. For fifteen minutes the trapper eyed it stonily. A low laugh rose in his throat and bubbled between his lips. With every moment it grew in volume. Then he suddenly found himself standing rigidly in the middle of the floor, shaking his fist in the direction of the midnight dancer, and screaming:

"Get down, you beast. You're dead, damn you, you're dead."

He felt Lytlewaite's big hands grasping his shoulders and shaking him.

"Look here, old boy," the policeman was saying in a shocked voice, "you mustn't carry on like this. Old Slag can't hurt you."

"You're bloody right he can't," yelled Shrub. "I ought to know. I killed him."

LYTLEWAITE'S half-sympathetic attitude never changed, but much of the boyishness vanished from his good-natured features.

"I know that," he said quietly. "It's too bad. Better tell me all about it, and get a good night's sleep."

"Sleep?" muttered Shrub, as though in a daze. "Sleep? Oh, yes. I might as well get it over."

He slumped to a bench before the table, while the constable lighted the lamp. "There's really nothing much to tell. We hated each other. I always disliked him because he caught so much more fur than I did. He never lost an opportunity to rub it in. When he took sick and couldn't attend to his own line, I couldn't pass up the chance to steal some of his best pelts and blame it on a wolverene. He didn't let on when he was well again, and set a snare for me.

"He went part way over his line and found one of those black foxes caught. Then he hot-footed back to his cabin, leaving it dead in the trap. When I went around for him, I dumped the fox among my own catch. Slag went after me when I got back to his shack. I

don't know whether he intended to get me or not—but he had his rifle in his hand. He didn't get a chance, anyway. I shot him first—not cold-bloodedly, like I'm telling you, but in a red rage. I'm not a regular murderer, you know."

Lytlewaite nodded his head. He looked older in many ways than his haggard prisoner.

"There aren't many regular murderers," he said, "but it only takes a minute to make one in the eyes of the law. Do you want to sign your name to what you've told me?"

"Might as well," said Shrub, shrugging his shoulders wearily.

Ten minutes later the document was complete and in the policeman's pocket. He rose and hung a blanket over the window, shutting off the view of the swinging shroud.

"Roll in and sleep," he ordered. "I'm not going to put the bracelets on you or anything like that. You know as well as I do that it wouldn't do you any good to make a break. It would only mean a slow death or a case of giving yourself up at the nearest police post."

"I realize that," admitted the trapper. He crawled gratefully into his bag. "Queer old world, isn't it? You'd never have suspected anything if fate hadn't stopped that body from going under the ice. It was the only evidence you had. Slag's cabin didn't offer you anything after I was through with it."

"Not a thing," assented Lytlewaite.

They ate a silent breakfast in the first light of the new day. It was evident that Shrub had at last known sleep. He was almost cheerful, and the furrows on his leathery face seemed to have been smoothed over.

"The last act, eh?" he suggested, as they collected their gear for the final lap of the journey.

Lytlewaite nodded dully.

Shrub's rifle was resting against the wall near the door. As the policeman knelt on the floor to roll up his sleeping bag, the trapper made a sharp movement toward the weapon. Lytlewaite leaped to his feet, his revolver flashing from its holster as he rose.

"None of that," he roared.

Shrub and the rifle were already outside the door. As the constable plunged in pursuit, there was a single report. Shrub was lying on his face when Lytlewaite reached him.

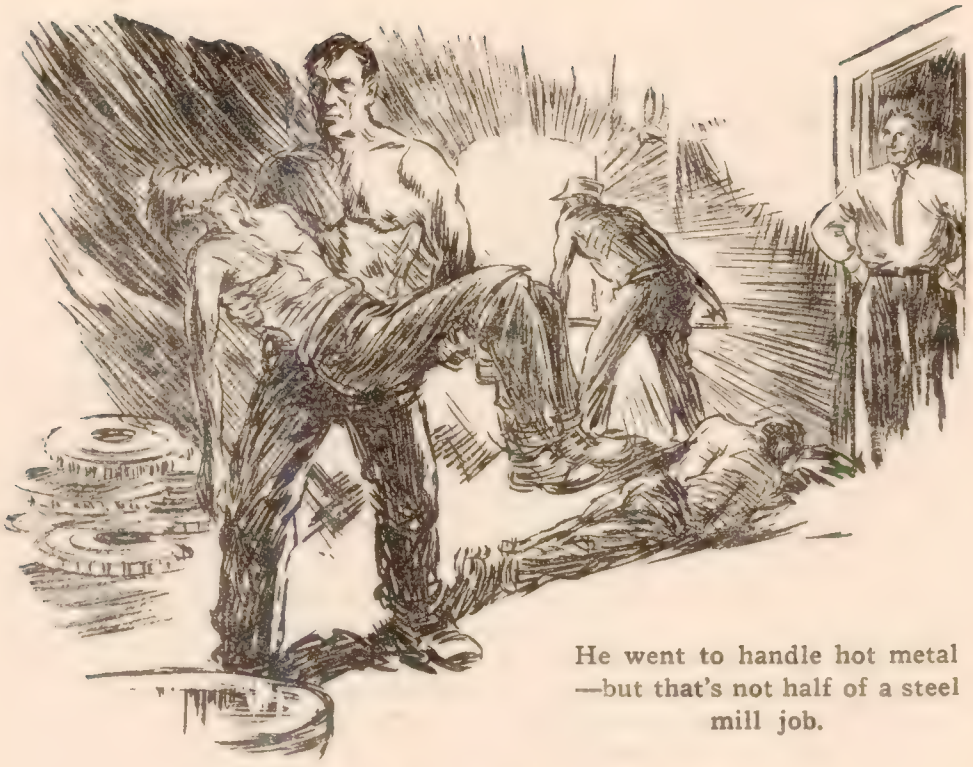
The officer examined the body very methodically, then shrugged. He walked to the lazily swinging form on the spruce tree, slowly lowered it, and rested it across his shoulder as he would a stick of firewood. He retraced his steps to where Shrub lay, and deposited his burden alongside the warm body. Producing his hunting knife, he slit the bonds of the shroud and rolled out a mass of ice, moss, and stones, molded about a five-foot sapling. With a sigh, he commenced incasing the stiffening form of Shrub in the canvas sheet

Among the short stories in the First November **COMPLETE**

TRAIL OF THE VANISHED

By Peter Britten and Herman Landon

Rufus Brent, detective extraordinary, is completely baffled by the strange disappearance of five multimillionaires—until he himself vanishes on the trail of the missing men



He went to handle hot metal —but that's not half of a steel mill job.

Red Metal

By Robert Carse

DOWN from the north the snow gale roared. The cold fury of it was all about him, here in the little valley, rocking the old flivver, battering aside the torn curtains, cutting his face and eyes with incessant blows.

George White was on the top of a high, stony ridge. Below, through the snow waves, he saw the yellow lights of a house.

"Boy, boy," he told himself thickly, "I'm gonna stop an' have Annie gi' me some o' that hot cider. Ma ain't worryin'. She knows I'll get back all right."

He released the foot brake, and the car whimpered, slid and shook on down the slope. Here high, strong snow-fences had been put up along the road, and he rode in sort of a calm tunnel, the wind and snow slanting fiercely overhead.

"Make me some o' those when I get back" he whispered. "Put 'em out behind the cow-barn. I ain't got the time, or the money now——"

Before him appeared the snow-whitened shape of a big mail box. He slowed the car, thinking he would have to get out and walk through the drifts to the house. But the way had been freshly cleared by a heavy and powerful car.

He shook his head slightly as he turned into those tracks.

"Ain't no car round here like that.

Who's callin' up in here, time like this? Must be——"

He did not finish that sentence. His mittened hands grasped the steering wheel tightly, and little knots of muscles came into prominence on his jaws. In the glow of the house's lights he saw the car which had opened the way for him. It was a new roadster, equipped with a costly searchlight mounted on the running board, special chains and heavy side curtains.

"Yeah," he said hoarsely, "you callin' up in here, Tony Lannion? Callin' on Annie, huh? Well, I'll see you down to Lancor, next week—see you more'n once!"

He backed his own machine into the highway.

IT was a quarter of ten when he stopped in the carriage shed at the end of his own barnyard. He got out and staggered towards the house. Snow was piled deeply before the front door, and he had to kick the stuff away before he could enter. There was a lamp burning in the rear parlor, and he could hear the slow creak of a rocker.

He pulled off his mittens, cap and sheepskin, dropped them in a corner of the little hall and stumped forward through the darkness.

His mother heard his step.

"George?"

"Yeah, ma." He came into the room, crossed over to her clumsily, reached down and kissed her. Then he stretched out his hands to the log fire behind her.

"Boy, boy, that's good!"

"George," she said softly.

He straightened up from the fire and looked at her.

"What happened over to town?" she asked.

His hands were still stretched out towards the warmth of the fire, but his eyes remained steadily on hers.

"I told Humphries to go ahead, ma."

She repeated the words slowly after him, as if she had not yet fully gotten their meaning:

"Go ahead?"

"Yep. Monday."

Her yellowed, veined hands reached out a bit towards him and then settled back on the bare arms of the rocker.

"You ain't——"

"Yes, I am. I'm goin' down Monday afternoon. Franky Gillieu'll get me on."

She had lifted her hands to her face, and he could see that she was silently weeping.

"Ma," he said hoarsely, "look up, ma, an' listen. Humphries an' me figgered it out this mornin'. If I sell the stock—everythin' but the house and the land—there ain't no more mortgage. An' then——"

He stopped. She had taken her hands from her face, looked past him, toward the kitchen door.

"Annie's in the kitchen," she whispered. "She come over this mornin' right after you left. She brung a thousand dollars her gran'ma left her. She wants to give it to you——"

But he was no longer looking at her.

"Annie!" he called.

The door opened slowly, and she stood there in one of his mother's faded aprons, her thin face flushed with leaning over the wood range in the kitchen.

"Come get yer supper, George," she said quietly. "It's been waitin' since close to eight."

"I et," he said slowly, "in the town. Tony Lannion's over to yer place in his new car. Come straight from Lancor to see you."

A LITTLE color flowed up into the girl's cheeks. But her voice was still calm.

"Come get yer supper, George. Them horses ain't been fed yet."

An unreasonable anger came over him.

"I don't want no supper, Annie Martin," he said. "An' I don't want no thousand dollars from you nor no one. Monday, ma an' me is movin'. I'm goin' down to Lancor an' work in the foundry. I'm goin' to handle hot iron as pa did. I'm goin' to make me some real money!"

"Lookit yer ma, George," said the girl. "She can't stand a thing like that."

"That's it," he said hoarsely. "That's the whole thing. Time I start to talk, ma starts to weep, an' we never get nowheres. Now, you listen, you two! Pa got killed, down in the foundry—sure. But that don't say I'm goin' to. That don't say I ain't goin' to come back. I am. I ain't sellin' this place. I'm keepin' it. I'm goin' down an' make some real money. I'm comin' back, an' have me a real dairy farm here. No more dirt farmin', no more pilin' rock. Yeah—an' no more borryin' from the bank. Now—what's wrong with that?"

His mother spoke:

"Did yer pa come back? He was goin' to do the same thing, after we was married five years. An' how about all the rest o' them that went down—did they come back? Ten places from here to town line—not a man on any of 'em."

"Yep, an' why? Because there ain't a decent livin' on the land—not from here to Vermont line. Can't blame a feller, when he gets his twelve dollars a day fer moldin'——"

From the door the girl spoke:

"An' what happens to 'em when they get it, George? Seven years—four er five fer some—and they ain't no good for anything. No more lungs—an' you, yer pa——"

He had raised up from over his mother and come a pace or so toward her.

"My pa got killed in a fight with Tony Lannion's pa. I ain't forgot that. If yer feelin' like it, put my supper out. I got those horses to tend to. Then I'm goin' to take you home. You ain't forgot Tony Lannion come sparkin' you t'night?"

"No," she said, "I ain't forgot that, George." Her eyes narrowed slightly. "You ain't give me much chance to forget it."

He picked up his lantern and started for the barn.

WHEN his work was done, he sat in the barn for over an hour, considering the situation, justifying his own conduct. He was thinking of Annie and of what he had said to her.

"Aw—she'll see, later. She ain't stubborn, like ma. You talked kind o' quick to her in there—quicker'n you should."

He went out into the night. Low fragments of snow cloud lay against the black sky. From behind them the moon broke, turning to soft fire the snow-covered mountains and valleys. From this ridge he could see to the north and west for forty miles.

"I ain't leavin' this," he thought, "not for long. Annie—she must know that."

He went on toward the house.

In the kitchen the light was out. The milk pails were washed and on their drying stand. His supper was placed on the table. He strode across to the range and lifted up a lid. It was banked for the night with green wood. Annie had done all this.

He smiled and looked toward the door into the parlor. Underneath the door lay a bright crack of light. Annie was waiting there for him. He ate the meal, blew out his lantern and opened the door.

His mother and Annie sat beside the fire place. His mother was asleep. Annie, too, seemed asleep, but she stared up at him when the kitchen door creaked as he shut it.

He stood there, looking at her. Remembering what she had done in the kitchen, he felt sorry for what he had said.

"Annie," he began slowly. "You 'n' me——"

From outside, from the direction of the road, came the loud sound of a car's horn. She rose rapidly. He saw that she had her coat and overshoes on.

"Who's that?" he asked sharply.

"Tony Lannion," she said. "I called him to come for me, right after you went out to the barn."

She went out the front door. He stood there for a moment in the middle of the room. Then he followed, almost at a run.

The roadster had plowed almost up to his barnyard gate. It had swung now and was headed towards the town road. One door was open, and beside it stood a short, thickset man in a checkered cap and a long fur coat.

Annie had gotten into the car. George hurried forward.

"What d' you want, guy," asked Lannion.

"I want to talk to Annie—Miss Martin."

Lannion looked over his shoulder into the car. When he turned back, his face was set in a mocking grin.

"Looks to me like Miss Martin don't want to talk to no retired dirt farmers, an'——"

His hands raised, and his powerful body settled into a fighting crouch. For the tall, gaunt-faced man before him had just mumbled deep in his throat and raised his right hand, as if to strike. His eyes gleamed murderously.

"Mebbe," Lannion asked in his low, harsh voice, "you want some of the same yer old man got?"

George dropped his hand and stepped back a pace.

"Naw, not now. But, you 'n' me, we'll have plenty o' time fer all that. I'll be handlin' iron down in the shop, too—next week. An' mebbe—mebbe, Lannion, I can fix a murder jury like your pa did. Now, get to hell out o' here!"

HE and his mother said nothing all the next day. It was not until he began to lock up the barns and pack his few clothes that her reserve broke and she talked with him. He would not answer her.

At dusk, Humphries and another man came with two trucks, to load in the cattle and the farm machinery.

Then she sat in the kitchen and wept. He stood in the door, his face oddly expressionless, looking down at her.

"C'mon, ma," he said after a time. "Yer things is ready. I'll drive you over to—to Annie's, now."

She looked up at him, but he looked away. At length, she rose and went out to the car, where he had packed all her bundles and clothes. Behind her, she could hear him closing the shutters, nailing down the cellar door. Then his slow, steady tread came over the snow towards the car.

Neither of them spoke or looked back, as he started the car and swung out into the town road. They said nothing until he stopped the car beside the Martin's mail box and milk platform.

"I'll leave yer things here on the milk platform," he told her. "When you walk up, you can tell the hired man to come down an' get 'em."

She had stepped from the car and was standing in the deep snow ruts. Suddenly, he reached out and caught her up to him.

"You ain't goin' to change yer mind, George?"

"I can't, ma."

He tried to kiss her, but she turned her face away. He set her slight body down. She turned her back on him and walked rapidly away.

THE foundry was, to him, a rather disappointing place. It was long, high and wide. Big windows stretched along one side. Below them were the benches that held the molding machines, where men were now already beginning

to work. Directly across the dirt floor, pocked with its cooling pits for the hot iron, was the door to the car shops. At the far end, in front of him, were the two hunched forms of the furnaces.

A hand jarred his elbow. He swung his head. Tony Lannion, dressed in clean overalls and a black silk cap, stood beside him.

"Come on, you. This ain't no barn dance. See that hammer? Go get it, an' get to work. Knock all the rough ends off them castin's over there. When you got enough, pile 'em in a barrow an' take 'em into the shaker-cans, over in the car shop. An' when yer through with that, come to me—over by Number One furnace—an' I'll find more!"

A very slight flush came up into George's cheeks.

"All right—boss," he said slowly.

Lannion stopped at that and swung halfway back. His fingers were locked in the wide belt about his waist, his head was thrust forward.

"'Boss' is right," he answered. "Don't ferget that! It won't be no hardship fer me to tear yer time-card in half. There's plenty of cow-kickin' rubes just like you, lookin' fer jobs in this shop. Now, get that hammer!"

Tony Lannion did not see him again until a quarter past eleven. The big warning bell had just rung. Every other activity in the plant stopped. Down the wide floor, locked in their strong wooden forms, the beautifully made molds of damp sand lay ready. Numbers One and Two furnaces were prime to pour.

Along one wall, facing towards the furnaces, stood every foundry-man in the place. They stood in couples, feet spread, heads a bit forward, eyes on the black forms of the furnaces before them. Between each couple rested the big steel ladles, held by long steel arms and handles.

Lannion swung along that line, hands in his belt, his shiny cap pushed far back. The great overhead gong jarred again. There was a terrific diffusion of red light into the murky, dark room. They were beginning to pour Number One.

Already the first pair in the line were trotting forward, faces and torsos turned from the fierce heat of the open furnace mouth. Their ladle was filled. They swung on toward the first mold, slowed, grunted together and canted the ladle. The red, molten stream of metal slopped, scorching and smoking, into the damp sand.

"Get along! Get along!" barked Lannion, watching that pair. "Hey, what you doin' there, cow-kicker? You want to fry some guy's foot fer him? Outa that line!"

The tall, brown-faced man he had spoken to let down, for a moment, his end of the empty ladle. He turned slowly to face Lannion.

"No, boss," he said slowly, "I give up kickin' cows Sat'day night. I'm plannin' to make me a foundry-man. You catch me fryin' any feller's foot out o' clumsiness, do what you was talkin' about this mornin'—and tear up that time-card!"

TONY LANNION'S hands came down from his belt. He started forward. But the line was moving rapidly toward the pouring furnace, and many of the men, who had known his father and the other man's father, were smiling broadly at the answer he had been given.

"O. K.!" he muttered, stepping back and trying to smile in turn. "O. K., rube!"

But he could not take his eyes off that tall, raw-boned form as it loped forward, to stand in relief against the red heart of the furnace. Slowly, almost unconsciously, Lannion shook his head. That man was green; it was his first day in any sort of shop. But he was quick and sure, wholly unafraid, as

skillful in his movements as the old molder who had paired off with him.

He held his own hands out before him. They were white and soft, now. He had not handled iron for over a year. He was—he knew deep down within him—afraid to handle it again. Two years of it—twice a day before the searing breath of the furnace mouth—had been too much for him. He knew his business, yes. They had made him a foreman.

He looked up across the room, searching for the other man again. They were done with Number One furnace and were beginning to pour Number Two. Great clouds of steam and acrid, sooty smoke were rising up from the opened forms. Molders and knockers were busy with hammers and steel hooks, releasing the forms, pulling the steaming pieces of metal towards the cooling pits, slaking them in the black and stinking water there.

Through that weird haze of steam and writhing smoke, Lannion found the man he sought. He had cast aside his overall jumper now and turned back his shirt sleeves from his long arms. In his hands he held a steel hook. With it, he tugged, spun and immersed casting after casting, moving with long, awkward steps. But he never stepped on a hot piece of metal, never stumbled over an opened form, and he went just a bit faster than the men beside him.

Lannion reached up into his shirt pocket, found a cigarette and lighted it.

"Ambitious boy, ain't you?" he said under his breath. "All set to pick off a molder's job an' some real money. Well, maybe you will, Georgie White. An' then, after about four years of it, you'll find out yuh can't move a damn bit, an' that one lung flutters an' chokes up on yuh."

At four o'clock, when the haggard, soot-grimed men fell into line again, Lannion came back.

"Well, what you think of foundryin' now, farmer? There ain't been a George White in this shop fer twenty years."

"I like it all right," George said in his slow voice. "Maybe it's because they ain't been a White in this shop fer twenty years that a Lannion got to be a boss, hey?"

THOSE two men watched one another for three years. It was Tony Lannion who seemed to lose. For George White had shortly become one of the fastest and surest men in the plant. In three months, his straight hour-by-hour pay had been raised twice. At the end of those three months, he was made a molder and went on piece work.

He came to love that work. His fingers were deft with the little molding stick; his castings came out of the forms practically perfect. By the end of his first year in the plant, he had the highest individual record—and three thousand dollars in the Lancor Savings Bank.

But that year had told on him, he knew. He had lost weight; he was thin; the tan of long years in the wind and sun had gone from him. Sometimes at night, lying on his flat, uncomfortable cot in the boarding house, he could not sleep; and in the mornings there was a tight, hot feeling in his head. He had to force himself to eat.

He could though, he told himself, stand two more years of it. Then he would have ten thousand dollars. That would get for him what he wanted. After he had that, he would never see a molding machine again.

Sundays, he got out the old flivver, scrubbed himself raw and clean and drove into the hills, towards what he silently called home. By the Martin's mail box, he would meet his mother. They talked very little during those meetings. There was still that awful barrier of silence between them. Looking down at her, into her tired, pale

eyes, he knew that she was aware of the change those months of toil in the foundry had made in him and feared that what had happened to his father would happen to him. Some Sunday, he would not be here. A note would come from the foundry superintendent, or from the Lancor Hospital——

Several times, during the first months, he tried to talk her out of that fear. But she gave him her one answer:

"Yer pa said them things, too."

Once, terribly lonely, shaken deeply in his belief that he was doing the right thing, he broke the promise he had made to himself and sought out Annie. Tony Lannion's roadster was parked beside her father's truck. He could see her father and Lannion out beyond the silo.

Annie opened the screen door and came to the head of the porch steps. She stopped there and stared down at him silently.

"Annie." He tried to smile. "I—I just come to see if you was the same."

Still she said nothing, just stared at him. From the barnyard, he could hear Lannion's voice, loud and confident. The sound of that voice enraged him.

"Suppose yer sparkin' round with him now, hey?"

Her expression did not at all change.

"I'm not," she said quietly, "sparkin' with any man from Lancor. Nor will I."

She turned and went back into the house.

HE did not go to the Martins any more on Sunday. He went instead to his own farm. The house and buildings needed paint. Boys walking home from the school house had smashed some of the window lights with stones. Inside, frost and chipmunks had been at work. The place was cold, dirty, desolate.

Standing on the little back stoop at twilight, looking out across the rocky, ridged fields, he visualized what he could do with that ten thousand dollars when he got it—what he could do to the barns—the new concrete floors he would put in—the silo and wind-mill he would build. The house—he would fix that, too—he and Annie. He smiled as he thought that. For, he told himself, she had not turned him down. She practically said she was not in love with Tony Lannion.

He worked harder than ever that year, with a grim, mechanical speed no other man in the plant could equal. At nights, in his little room at the boarding house, he sat up late with his bank book, planning what he would do with his money.

At the end of that year he had over seven thousand dollars in the bank. According to his calculations, he would be able to quit at the end of the summer. Then, by spring and the open weather, he would have almost everything ready and would be able to bring his mother back—and Annie.

In July that year, the drought came. From Canada to Virginia, crops burned up in the fields. Cows lowed all day for water, waiting with patient, glazed eyes for the dew that came with night.

In Lancor, the macadam of the streets was soft and sticky underfoot. Concrete sidewalks and the brick walls of houses and factories retained and intensified the heat. Over the town, over the foundry, the smoke from the chimneys lay low, in a great black cloud.

They kept two ambulances at the doors of the foundry all day that summer. An average of twelve men a day went out into them, sometimes to their homes, usually to the Lancor Hospital. On the floor, they were pouring twice a day, and the heat was suffocating.

George White remembered very little of that summer. There was in his memory an impression of awful heat, of acrid smoke, of burning steam, of puddled, scorching metal.

His mother and Annie he had seen

once, in the middle of July. He had driven to his own place, then to the Martins. They had both been there by the mail box to meet him. He had read in their eyes the fear they held for him.

They had talked to him then—asked him to quit, to stop, to come back to the farm.

"No," he had replied. "No, I ain't quittin' until September first."

TONY LANNION he saw every day, standing silently at the door of the car shop, when they poured the iron—at eleven and at four. He wore a clean, white shirt, had a bandanna handkerchief tied around his neck. There was no sweat on his face or body. His hands were soft and white and clean.

He was there in the door of the car shop on the morning they poured, when the thermometer registered one hundred and eighteen. Fourteen men had gone out that morning. They had laid them in rows by the door, until the ambulances could come to take them.

Then, at eleven, the gong sounded. They were going to pour. George White and his partner, old Franky Gillieu, led the line that day. They were the first ones to step into the fiery breath of the furnace and stagger away again, the ladle of red metal held between them.

They did not stop when their ladle was empty and the forms kicked clear. They went into the line again. For men were stumbling and falling before that open furnace hearth. Some lay still, hands up over their faces. Others were crawling away on their hands and knees, through the blazing puddles of spilled iron, toward the air, the sunlight.

They did not, though, make that second ladle-fill. In front of George White, a sandy-headed boy, stripped to the waist, his thin trousers slick against his body with sweat, suddenly caved in at the knees and fell forward, his bare back against a red-hot wheel casting.

For a moment there was a scream of agony. The boy rolled over and lay still. Between them, old Franky Gillieu dropped the ladle and, stepping toward the boy, started to gather him into his arms.

"No. It is impossible. Me, I can't!"

George White slid his great, calloused hands down the sides of his grimed trousers, drying them of their sweat.

"Stand clear, Franky, an' I'll take him."

He stooped swiftly down, back and shoulder muscles flexing. Then he strode on, staggering just a bit, through the rows of locked molds and the red, smoking castings. There was a blurred sensation in his own head. He was having great difficulty in breathing. It seemed that invisible hands were against his panting chest, pushing him, holding him back.

Before him lay two carelessly opened molds and their blue-hot castings. Beyond, a blazing lake of iron dropped from the ladle of a fainting man. Between those he started to stride. In his weariness and exhaustion, he half trod on the blue-hot end of a coupling casting

The heat seared up through the sole and side of his heavy boot. A grunt of pain came through his lips. He tried to go on—then knew that he could not. Before him was the spilled ladle-fill; at his side, another smoking casting; behind him, the coupling he had just trod upon. He cried out, attempting to stand erect. A gray blankness came over his brain, and he felt his knees giving beneath him. He tried, with the last of his conscious energy, to fall to his left, away from that red metal.

HEARING the same voice, time and time again, he opened his eyes and looked up. Annie Martin sat beside him.

"Annie," he said. It was a whisper. But he saw her face clearly. "What's the matter, Annie? I'm all right."

One of her hands came out across the bed. She spoke, so softly that he could barely hear:

"Your ma——" She held his hand with fierce, nervous strength.

"What, Annie?"

"Your mother——"

Then he understood. He raised up in the bed and leaned toward her.

"How, Annie? Why?"

Her voice came to him—a whisper:

"Tony Lannion called up—said you were—dead. Killed in the foundry. And your mother—she was at the phone. She just——"

He lay back and was still. He could feel her hands, cool and steady, on his face and eyelids.

"But, why, Annie? I'm all right. I ain't hurt bad. Nob'dy could——"

"I—he thought that if—he came out last night—— Told me he was ready to quit the foundry. Said he would —— I sent him away and came—came here."

She stared at him, her hands on his shoulders, trying to hold him back.

"Nope, Annie. Get out o' here now! Get out! I'll—be back!"

He swung and staggered past her, towards the grimy pile of clothes in the corner of the room.

"Lannion," he muttered, jerking back his leather belt. He jammed his bandaged foot into the scorched, torn shoe.

"Lannion! By God!"

She was in the hall with the nurse and the doctor, waiting for him to come out. He did not seem to see them. When he felt their hands on him, he turned and snarled, tearing their hands away.

Old Franky Gillieu, who had worked with his father, was the first to see him come into the foundry. The old man tried to stop him.

"Get back, Franky. No—I ain't. He ain't worth that much!"

Then he saw the man he wanted. He did not yell or even raise his hands. He strode silently toward him. Tony Lannion could have run—might have gotten away. For some reason, he only stood there, like a man in a trance.

When the other was close in upon him, Lannion crouched swiftly and struck, up and in. That was his only blow. The other had him by the throat, holding him at arm's length beating him across the face and head with open-handed blows.

No one stepped in; no one tried to interfere. When it was over, the ring broke and let George White through. He held the other man by the torn neck of his white shirt and dragged him limp and bloody, across the wide room—through cooling pits, over locked forms, to the huge windows beside the molding benches.

He picked up a mold and hurled it through the window. Then he turned and wiped his hands on his bare chest. Reaching down, he grasped the body of Tony Lannion and hurled it through the hole he had made.

Behind him the warning gong rang. Automatically, the crowd, which had stood behind him, began to fall away. They picked up their ladles and formed in line.

There was that sudden, beautiful burst of light. They were pouring the iron. But he did not seem to see that light. He was walking slowly toward the door. He knew Annie Martin waited for him.

Experience is bound to teach you something—especially if it hands you a wallop and provokes your "best girl" to ask questions.

A Committee Of One

By Charles Lent

THERE are some guys that just love to be on committees. It makes them feel important and all that. You can take it from me that it's not so hot. I've been on one and I know. Also, women are stubborn—they hang on to an idea like a dog to a bone. And golf is a game that's not all it's cracked up to be.

I found out all these things just lately. Experience, that's it. You have to be awful dumb if it doesn't teach you something, especially when it hands you such a wallop over the old bean as it did to me.

The trouble started when somebody, who was not quite bright, suggested we all chip in and buy a chest of silver for the chief clerk. It was his twenty-fifth wedding anniversary and they thought something should be done about it. Ours is a big office—the Cosmopolis Trust Company in Wall Street—and they have plenty of excuses for coming around to collect coin off you.

Miss Boylan, one of the stenographers, is going to get married. Let her, says I. She looks considerably over twenty-one, old enough to know her own mind. But no, I ain't let off that easy. They are buying a radio set or a parlor rug or some other nonsense for a wedding present. How much will I chip in? Horton has a new baby at home and some goofy individual comes around to collect some jack off of me to buy the kid a porringer. What the hell is a porringer, anyway? I didn't like to seem ignorant at the time and ask. All I know is that when I was a kid I didn't have one. Yeah, I dug as usual. Say, I've given till it hurts in that office.

I'd my mind all made up to say,

"No," real loud and rough, to the next panhandler that came around to me with a subscription list. I changed my mind when I found out it was for the chief clerk they were buying this chest of silver. You see, he is—well—the chief clerk. The main guys don't know we're alive except through what he tells them of our work. So I didn't even growl, but gave as usual, and foolishly thought that was the end, so far as I was concerned.

I didn't like the guy who was chief clerk—never did and never will. I wondered how it leaked out that it was his anniversary. It wasn't in the papers or nothing. Could it be that the foxy old guy let it out to some of his toadies with a hint that a chest of silver would be acceptable? I wouldn't put it past him. I thought his wife was entitled to a consolation prize after twenty-five years with him, but I didn't say so.

I coughed up a five spot that I could have used in other and better ways and thought I was through. You never know, do you?

Somebody took the money that was collected and bought the chest. It was kept under cover at the office and most of us had a squint at it—all we got for our money. The dames in the office were all atwitter about it. The plan was to present it one Saturday after banking hours with speeches and everything. That was a swell program, with all of us anxious to leave promptly at one o'clock. If they had any money left over—they wouldn't—they never do—they were going to blow it in on a bunch of roses as big as a house for the chief clerk to take home to his frau. That was the plan. It didn't work out just that way though.

ROSE works in the same office with me, that's how we met. I was strong for Rose from the first minute I saw her taking dictation from one of the main guys. Pretty? You bet! I didn't know then how stubborn she was. Oh, I fell all right—me that had laughed at other guys that were in love.

"Love 'em and leave 'em," had been my motto up to then. I'd looked at girls as sharpers, trying to ease some fellow into the position of good provider so that they wouldn't have to work any more. Still, they seemed to like me pretty well. I had only to raise my finger, and they'd come a-running.

Rose was different—polite and pleasant, but indifferent. She didn't seem to care whether the boys in the office liked her or not. The other dames had it figured out that she had a steady they didn't know about. I gave her some encouragement and thought she was beautiful but dumb when she didn't seem to catch on. I made it plainer that I was open for dates. She never batted an eyelash. Simp that I was to think she was dumb! Why, that girl is smarter than any man in our office. That is something else I found out recent.

Funny, but when she didn't see that I was trying to flag her, it made me keener than ever. I made up my mind I'd make her notice me. I did it, though it wasn't easy. By the time I'd made her realize I was on the map, I was sunk. I cared more for that kid than I'd ever thought I would care for anybody. I sure was caught—me, the guy who'd been giving girls the merry ha-ha ever since I left school.

Everything was going fine. She was wearing my ring, and I'd never been so happy in all my life. If you'd just seen Rose once, you'd understand how lucky I was.

Then I took up golf. I had a right to if I wanted to, didn't I? I still claim I was within my rights.

It started from a circular I got. It seems they were forming a new country club out in New Jersey. This circular said all the golf courses in the metropolitan area were crowded and

congested; the new club would fill a crying need. The invitations to join were being sent to a selected list of rising young business men. You could buy your membership on the deferred-payment plan—the way most people buy their cars. They had pictures of the links and the proposed clubhouse on the circular and said how easy it was going to be to jump into your car, at the close of a strenuous day at business, and, in less than an hour, be on the porch of the clubhouse—proposed—storing up energy for the next day's grind. Sign here if you wished further particulars. No obligation.

I signed and in no time at all I was a member. They explained that there was no clubhouse—yet. But a golf course of six holes was ready, and I could go out and play any time I wanted to.

I had to dress for it, didn't I? If you didn't, the other fellows would think you were just plain ignorant. Sure, I had to have the clothes.

I had a car, a second-hand one. I could breeze out there in it. but the train service wasn't bad, and I decided to go by train the first few times till I got the lay of the land.

SO I went to a place where they keep the togs and the tools and shot the works. I got me a golf suit with the baggiest pair of trousers you ever saw, a sweater and golf stockings that matched, shoes with special soles, a cap, and everything. Then I picked out a golf bag and some clubs. I went easy on the clubs and only bought the ones the man said were absolutely required. The clothes set me back so much I was feeling poor when it came to getting clubs.

The Saturday morning after this orgy of buying, I hopped out of bed and looked at the weather. It was a peach of a day. I decided to go out to my club and try out those six holes. I didn't anticipate any trouble in learning to play. If I could learn to drive a flivver in two days, the way I did, I ought to learn all there was to learn about a game in a couple of weeks.

I got into the subway and started down town with my bag of clubs and wearing my new clothes. When I got out on the street in the bright sunlight, I suspected that my clothes were the least bit loud. I was sure they were O. K. though. The man in the store said they were an unusual pattern, the cloth imported from Scotland. Those Scotchmen ought to know what's right for the game. They invented golf, didn't they?

Nobody noticed me much in the crowd. That's one nice thing about New York—nobody bothers you. When I started to leave the subway train at Wall Street, some young kids saw me and yelled:

"Fore!"

I paid no attention, just walked along looking as snooty as I knew how.

It was a lot different when I struck the office. Most of the fellows in my department had something to say about my new outfit. I put it down to plain envy. They didn't belong to an exclusive club for rising young business men. But it was Rose—my Rose—that gave me the dirtiest dig of all. She didn't like my clothes, said they were loud and in wretched taste, told me she credited me with better sense. All I could think to say was:

"Yeah?"

I was stunned the way she went at me. Never a cross word between us before. She kept on till she'd said too much. I shot some hot ones back at her and left her.

I went out to the club though. This was my first visit and I'd expected to enjoy it, with Rose watching me play. I didn't have a good time and I was disappointed in the place. It looked like a real-estate development gone

wrong, that had been turned into a golf course as an afterthought. I didn't expect a clubhouse. The circular plainly said it was a proposed clubhouse that they had a picture of. Say. tell me this, will you? How can they take a picture of a clubhouse that is only proposed, showing motor cars at the main entrance, a servant in livery taking a member's clubs out of his car, and a lot of swell folks sitting on the veranda drinking high balls? At least, in the picture they looked like high-ball glasses.

THE six holes were finished, and there were folks playing around. One guy, who seemed to know what he was talking about, said the course would be O. K. when it was finished—that playing there beat waiting in line at one of the public courses. He could play golf, I guess, but he certainly wasn't any rising young business man. You should have seen the way he was dressed, downright shabby with an old green sweater and a hat I wouldn't have offered to a tramp.

I didn't get along so good in my playing either. After fighting that way with Rose, my heart wasn't in it. Maybe there is more to the game than you'd think to watch it. I walked around those links with a funny feeling, like where a tooth had been pulled out. I kept thinking about Rose. I was still mad at some of the things she had said. It might be just as well, I thought. Regular cat-and-dog life we'd have led, if she was that sort. I'd never suspected she had such a temper.

I got tired of looking for my ball all the time and called it a day. There being no clubhouse, the only thing to do, when I was through playing, was to go back to the station and wait for my train. I discovered there wouldn't be a train for twenty minutes. There was a girl waiting for the train. I looked at her sort of absentlike and thought there was something funny about her. Finally, it registered. She hadn't any stockings on and she was carrying a cane. Her shoes looked like straw sandals or bedroom slippers. Funny rig to be out in the street in. I let it go at that. I wasn't interested in this girl or any girl but Rose, and since this morning I wasn't so darn interested in Rose. No, I'd been right at first in keeping women at a distance.

If some women waiting for the train hadn't gawped at her, like she was something escaped from a circus, I wouldn't have noticed that girl further. I heard one woman say to another with a sniff:

"Of all the ridiculous get-ups. It's downright immoral. She ought to be spanked; and, if she was my child, she would be."

Then I gave her another look and saw she was a damn pretty girl. Her eyelashes nearly touched the ground in front of her when she walked, and she had a pair of black eyes that sent a thrill right through you when she looked at you. After hearing those women, my heart went out to her, then and there. The world seems to be full of fundamentalist females who think if you jazzed up your clothes a bit you were ridiculous. That girl was a peach, a pippin. Those old hags—they'd never see forty again, any of them—were envious of her youth and beauty.

I let the girl see she was not unappreciated and some way we got to talking. She told me she was an art student with a studio in Greenwich Village. I told her I was a banker with one of the largest firms in Wall Street. That was no lie, the part about being with a big firm. The Cosmopolis is about as big as they come. I knew that some of my talk was hot air and boasting, but I could see she was what she said she was, and I believed every last word she said. Silly of me, but you see Art was over my head. I couldn't draw a straight

line, and to meet one of those gifted people who painted or sculpted gave me a great kick. I helped her on the train when it came, like she was something precious. The train was crowded, but I managed to find her a seat beside a courtly old guy. I stood in the aisle and tried to talk to her. She gave the man beside her an appealing look out of her black eyes, and he rose like a trout to a fly.

"Take this seat beside your wife," he says to me. "I'm going in the smoker."

I GOT red and tried to stammer out that she wasn't my wife, but he was pushing through the crowd and didn't hear a word I said. I fell into the seat beside her, feeling funny all over. My wife—I'd expected Rose would be my wife. How did this guy get the idea I was spliced to this dame? It didn't faze her at all. She went right on talking about modernistic art. She was mad about it. Wasn't I? I didn't know what it was, so just looked judicial and said:

"Well, yes and no, if you know what I mean."

All the way into New York all I had to say was "Yes," "No," and "I don't know." But it seemed that my brief comments were all she expected of me.

She talked a steady stream and had me fascinated. When we got off the train and across the ferry, she hops into the first taxi she sees and just assumes that I was going with her. I hadn't meant to. I was going home to put up my clubs, change my clothes, and go around to see Rose. She acted so positive sure that I was seeing her home that I couldn't do anything else but get in the taxi with her. She gave the man the address and we started for the Village. While I was paying for the taxi, she suggested that I come up and see her studio and some of her work. I'd never seen the inside of a studio. I wanted to, and this was the first chance —and might be the last—I'd ever have. So I said I'd be glad to.

Her studio was small and her work was terrible. It looked like stuff some little kindergartners had done to spite their drawing teacher. According to her, I must have been all wrong about it though. She said it was much admired and considered very daring and advanced. She was going to have a one-man show of it at a gallery up town soon.

We hadn't been in the studio long before she shook up a drink. I had one or two—maybe it was three. After that, I didn't care much what happened to me. Before I knew it, I was dated to take her out to dinner. We went to some dump in a cellar where the food was bad but the booze good. It was eight o'clock before I left her, and I only did it then 'cause she had a date for the evening. We got along fine and I enjoyed every minute I spent with her. No harm if I found some one that didn't consider me and my clothes funny. I was free to chin to her as much as I wanted to, wasn't I? After all, it's a free country.

Only one thing went wrong that afternoon. I lost my golf bag and the clubs, some place between the ferry and the last place we went to have a drink. I remembered carrying them off the train with me, and that's the last I remembered seeing them. I was nonchalant about it. I told her that on Monday I'd get me a whole flock of new clubs.

I guess I was the least bit woozy after all we'd had to drink, but she was as fresh as when she started. She sure could stand her liquor like a gentleman. I felt quite man-of-the-worldish as I started for Washington Heights, where I live. I had a date for Tuesday night with the girl. Her name was Madeline Manning. The reason I had to wait till Tuesday night was because she was dated up for Sunday and Monday

nights. A girl like that was sure to be popular. So I wasn't surprised.

IN my sober senses, I wouldn't have chosen that evening to go around to see Rose, but I told you I was the least bit woozy. I ain't used to booze. Bank clerks are not supposed to drink, not till they get to be bank presidents anyway. I meant to be dignified and cool but wasn't either. Rose sailed into me for being drunk and, in no time at all, I was out of there on my ear, so to speak. I had my ring. Rose had given it back to me.

I did not feel so good next day—which was Sunday—and didn't go out of the house except to get some cigarettes. I didn't make a move in Rose's direction, just hung around the house waiting for a phone call from her that didn't come. My kid sister was wise. She wanted to know if I'd fought with Rose.

"I'll bet it's all your fault, if you have," she said.

I told her to mind her own business, and she grinned.

"I thought so."

It sure is uncanny how women dope things out. They don't reason the way we men do—just jump at conclusions—and more than half the time they're right.

Rose didn't speak to me the next day, nor the next. I thought that, if she was waiting for me to make any advances, she'd have a long wait. It was darn unpleasant to be in the same office with her and not speaking. It was a relief to meet Madeline that Tuesday night. She seemed to appreciate me, if some other girls did not. She still had bare legs; she wore a red dress and a red scarf tied around her head; and her cigarette holder was red, too. She looked like a pirate.

We drifted around the Village, dancing sometimes, talking sometimes, and drinking always. It was an old story to her; she'd lived down there eleven months. But it was all new to me. I got a great kick out of it. Everywhere we went were artists, writers, singers, dancers. They all seemed to know and like Madeline.

Next day at the office I let fall a few hints about my new girl. That's all I needed to have it broadcast. In a big office like ours there is a lot of gossip and it travels as fast as in any small-town sewing circle. I wanted the news to get back to Rose. Funny, isn't it, how you want to hurt the person you are fond of? If she heard it—and she must have—she never gave a sign. She was pale, but not unusually so, and she still wasn't speaking to me. As the days went by, I got reckless and saw Madeline as often as she'd let me. She had a lot of dates, but managed to go out with me a lot.

Then came the Saturday of the presentation of that chest of silver. Talk about Hamlet with Hamlet left out! The chief clerk was sick and not down to the office that day. His wife telephoned. As near as I got the dope, he didn't have anything more serious than a bellyache the matter with him, though his wife was afraid it was appendicitis. There was a fine how-do-you-do about it in the office. That was the day of the anniversary, and that present had to be delivered. They asked the assistant secretary what they were to do, and he decided right off the bat. I was unlucky enough to be passing his desk just then and he called to me.

HOW about it, Fred, have you an engagement this afternoon?"

I didn't have. Fine chance I had to have an engagement. Rose still wasn't speaking to me, and Madeline had a date.

"No, sir, I haven't."

"Then I appoint you a committee of one to take this chest of silver and deliver it. If Mr. Morris is well enough

to see you, tell him we all regret his illness, will you?"

And that was that. The assistant secretary turned to somebody else. The thing was settled. Me, that didn't like this chief-clerk bozo at all and didn't approve of giving him the stuff—I was the one they picked on to take it up to him and make a speech saying we hoped he would be better soon. I was elected; I couldn't back out.

Well, it wouldn't take me long. I'd stop on West Ninety-something Street where he lived, on my way up to Washington Heights, and that's all there would be to it. Any speech about wishing he'd soon get well would be mighty short. I really hoped he'd choke.

Just before twelve o'clock, when the bank closes, I had a telephone call from Madeline. She was in great trouble, she said. Could I come up to her studio? I told her I sure could and that I'd be up almost immediately. I'd fix things when I got there. I hung up, wondering what could be the trouble. I was flattered that she turned to me when she was in a jam. She knew slews of more important people than me—she was always telling me about them. Yet she had turned to me when she was in trouble. My chest measurement swelled about two inches as I thought that these girls who were so ambitious to carve out careers for themselves were just women after all and needed a strong, level-headed man around to advise them. I took the chest of silver under my arm and hot-footed it up to her studio.

She cried on my neck when I arrived. She was in trouble. Some very important people were coming in that afternoon with a buyer of her work in tow. It was the turning point of her career, and the poor thing didn't have a drop of gin in the place—no booze of any sort. She'd spent her allowance that her folks sent her. What was she to do?

Apparently it was impossible to interest a buyer in her work unless she filled him up with booze first. Having seen her pictures, I could understand that. No one that was cold sober would pay good money for one of them.

I offered to lend her the money she needed. That made her indignant. Certainly not! She liked and respected me, but a young girl alone had to be careful. She made me feel as if I'd insulted her. I couldn't see just how, but she cheered up when she thought of a way out. I could go to Henri's and get the things she needed. She'd make a list. Lots of her boy friends sent her booze, just the way they sent her flowers. I couldn't see the difference myself but had sense enough not to say so. I said I'd go and get what she needed and for her not to worry her pretty head. It seemed that she needed a lot of things. I had a list as long as my arm when I started out. As I was leaving, she called to me not to forget plenty of cigarettes.

I got everything on her list—Scotch, rye—gin—and I didn't forget the cigarettes. She was so grateful when I got back, and insisted that I stay and help her through the ordeal. She said the afternoon meant so much to her. I couldn't leave the poor girl in the lurch, all nervous and excited as she was. I stayed, and that was the start of as wild a party as I've ever been on. I didn't plan it, certainly not. I meant to get Madeline all set for these important visitors and then beat it up town with that chest of silver I had to deliver. The party just happened.

THERE were six people in the gang that came to the studio. We made out, by holding our arms high, the way you do in the subway, and some of them sat on the others' laps. I was busy serving drinks.

Gee, but they were a high-brow lot, with their talk about "values" and "at-

mosphere." They meant arty things, not the price of things or the air. Just at first, I felt like an ignorant gink that didn't know about such things; but that was to begin with. Before long, I was fed up with all the talk. It sounded just like words with no meaning that any one with any sense would want to know about.

I never did find out which of the three men was the prospective buyer of some of Madeline's work. They were all there with a thirst, and by five o'clock the supply I'd brought in was gone. I gave Madeline the high sign and asked should I go out and get more. She said instead we'd go down to Joe's for more of the same. I tried to duck for home, meaning to leave the silver on my way. They wouldn't hear of it. So I went along. We had drinks at Joe's and went along to another place for dinner and dancing. It was taken for granted by every one of that bunch, including Madeline, that I was the host. Anyway I paid and paid and paid. We were in the Gypsy Lair at two o'clock Sunday morning, still dancing and drinking, when I struck the bottom of my roll. The waiter gave me the check for what we'd had there, and it was thirty-eight dollars.

All I could dig up out of my pockets, by fishing in every one of them, was four dollars and some odd cents—about enough for the tip. I had an all-gone feeling when I realized that. What a fool I'd been to come out on this party! I looked down the table to where Madeline sat. She was just as good looking as she'd ever been, but, for the first time since I'd known her, she didn't look good to me. I watched her for a minute or so and felt that I positively disliked her.

I'd blown in all the money I had with me and was thirty-eight dollars in the hole besides. And what for? When you came to think of it, what was it to me if she was broke and in a hole with a crowd coming in to see her work? There she was, laughing, and talking first to the man on one side of her and then to the man on the other. She acted like she hadn't a care in the world. I looked the three men in the party over careful—no help there. Not one of the three looked as if he had thirty-eight bucks on him or would let me have them if he did. Not one of them had offered to buy so much as a pack of cigarettes since we started, hours ago, on this party.

I'D seen the boss of the Gypsy Lair earlier in the evening. He was small and fat and smiling, but, behind the smiles, he looked as hard boiled as they come. I knew I hadn't a chance to persuade him to let me sign the check and pay him Monday after I'd got the money some place. Then my eye fell on that chest of silver I'd lugged around with me from place to place. It was worth a lot of money. It was solid silver and came from a swell place—security enough for ten thirty-eight-dollar checks.

I jumped up like I'd been stung by a bee, grabbed that chest of silver, tucked it under my arm and rushed off to interview the proprietor.

Say, he was a hard-boiled baby. He wiped the smile off his face about the second word I said, and, by the time I'd finished explaining, he was looking meaner and uglier than any one I'd run up against in all my travels around New York. I ripped open that package of mine quick and let him lamp the silver, and he calmed down some. I nearly talked his arm off before he said reluctantly that it would be O. K. for me to sign the check and leave the chest of silver with him as security.

I certainly did heave a big sigh of relief when he said that. I walked back to the table, picked up the check that was lying by my plate, signed it with a flourish and handed it and three of the

four dollars I had left to that surly waiter. He took it like something that was germy, looked at my three dollars as if he was disappointed, hesitated a minute and then walked away. I looked down the table and hoped that I'd never see any of that bunch again, and announced loud and firm that I was leaving.

They yelled to me that I couldn't do that. We'd make a night of it. If I was bored here, they knew of other places that were livelier. They weren't going home—they were going to make a night of it. I told them real polite that they could do what they wanted to do but that I was through, was going home to hit the hay. Their enthusiasm for going on to another place waned sudden when they got it through their heads that their host was leaving them flat.

Madeline came around and tried to persuade me to change my mind. She pouted, pleaded, and almost cried, but I was firm. She gave it up as a bad job, left me flat and let another guy take her home to her studio, which was certainly O. K. with me. I never wanted to see her again.

That crowd piled into a taxi and left me on the sidewalk with a headache and a bad taste in my mouth. I walked to the subway and dragged myself home somehow.

I HAD some sleep, but that chest of silver was on my mind. I thought I'd better get it delivered before noon. I'd have to tell my old man just how big a fool I'd been, borrow the money from him, take the lecture he was sure to give me, and get down town as quick as I could. So about ten o'clock I managed to drag myself out of bed, take a shower, dress, and walk into the dining room. I felt pretty rocky, but some coffee would straighten me out, I thought.

I wasn't looking forward to what my old man would say, and took a brace as I opened the dining-room door and walked in with my head up, shoulders back and a pippin of an alibi I'd thought up. There was no one there but my kid sister.

"Hello," I said, slumping into a chair. I felt relieved that dad wasn't there that minute. It was like going to the dentist to have a tooth out and finding that the dentist wasn't home—a reprieve, you know.

"Where's dad?" I asked my kid sister, staring at the food on the table with dislike.

"Mother and dad have gone to Aunt Mary's to stay over Sunday. They will be back to-morrow night."

I just stared at her. Dad away, gone to Connecticut! Where was I going to get the money to get that chest of silver out of hock? What would happen to me if I didn't? I felt a sickening certainty that last night's foolishness was going to cost me my job.

It was downright silly of me to get so upset. I've thought since of a dozen places I could have gone—of a dozen friends who would have helped me out. I had plenty of money in my savings account at the Cosmopolis. No need at all for me to get as steamed up over it as I did.

It must have been something I'd eaten the night before—cucumbers, maybe. I remember we had some. Cucumbers never did agree with me. I must have looked pretty awful for my sister gave a little scream:

"Freddie, what is the matter?"

I started to tell her that nothing was the matter, when the queerest thing happened. The room went black, and I could feel myself falling. Yeah, I keeled over in a faint. Can you imagine that? I'd never done such a fool thing in all my life before. The more I think of it, the surer I am it was the cucumbers.

I don't know how long it was before

I opened my eyes. My kid sister was kneeling beside me, crying and frightened. Some way I got to my room and threw myself face down on the bed. My sister said she was going to telephone for the doctor. I tried to tell her I didn't need a doctor, but I couldn't get the words out. I heard her at the telephone, and then I must have gone to sleep, or something, for that's the last I remember for a long time.

The next time I opened my eyes Rose was sitting by my bed. My kid sister was standing at the foot, looking as frightened as ever. I was so glad to see Rose that I didn't even wonder how she got there. I forgot all about our fight and that we weren't engaged any more, and just reached out my arms for her, and she fell right into them. I must have had ptomaine poisoning, for I was sick and weak. That's why I cried like a baby. Rose did too. My kid sister tiptoed out of the room and left us.

IT wasn't hard telling Rose about it all. I started in by saying what a fool I'd been. I said worse things about myself than Rose could have thought up to say to me. I came clean, including the chest of silver in hock in Greenwich Village.

Rose made me drink something. I went to sleep again holding her hand for dear life. I was scared she'd go away and leave me. I wouldn't have blamed her any if she had, after the way I'd acted. Say, ain't it wonderful the way women will stick by the awful fools we men are sometimes?

It was the middle of the afternoon when I woke up again. I was better. I could get up and dress, and those two girls fussed over me like I was a real invalid. They explained that my kid sister couldn't get our doctor. He was out of town. In her fright she hadn't known anybody to turn to but Rose. The minute she heard there was anything the matter with me, Rose came running.

That's all, I guess. Oh, the chest of silver? Sure, I got that out of hock that very afternoon and delivered it to the chief clerk's house. I told him the delay was caused by my having had an attack of ptomaine poisoning. Rose went with me to get it. She loaned me the money I needed. She knew how important it was that I get it and deliver it pronto.

By ten o'clock Monday morning I'd repaid her loan. It was in the office, and I couldn't say much when I handed her the money—"Thanks a lot," or something like that. But that night I thanked her proper.

And say, it's a funny thing. Do you know what? I was a fool, I'm not denying that. But out of that mix-up with Madeline Manning came one good thing. It's this:

I thought I loved Rose before. Pshaw, I didn't know what love was till this happened. I didn't half appreciate her. I do now, though. She's sure one sweet kid.

FROM THREE TO FOUR by Bernard Breslauer

Tom McNamara, disarming speakeasy proprietor, stumbles on Romance in a city park, and then discovers the high cost of romance.

In the First November COMPLETE

Chink Logic

By Bernard Breslauer

Tom McNamara may be a fool but he is also an Irishman — a chink-Irishman.

THE barroom was noisy, but, in the back room of the speakeasy where Tom McNamara sat facing Detective Sergeant Jerry Sullivan, it was comparatively quiet.

"Well?" said Sullivan.

McNamara's answer came slowly, in low, distinct tones that had in them a trace of bitterness and hopelessness.

"I am going to the Pavilion where Saurel and his mob hang out. I'm going to-night."

Sullivan sprang to his feet. "You're crazy," he said.

Sullivan had come to McNamara's speakeasy fifteen minutes before and had found McNamara drawing beer behind the crowded bar.

"Thought I'd drop in and wise you up that the truce is over," Sullivan said, lighting a cigar.

McNamara received the news impassively, with a nod of his head.

"'Snowy' Rogers was bumped off not more than an hour ago at the corner of North Third and Dorsey," Sullivan explained. "Same old story—stolen car, machine gun, body riddled with bullets, couple of scared witnesses who don't know nothing. Not that Snowy is important. It's the fact that his killing means that the truce is over. And so's my vacation. And," he added after some deliberation, "so's yours."

"Why?" asked McNamara, attempting a smile without success.

"It's no secret in this town," Sullivan said bluntly, "that you were the big

cheese in the Gatti round-up, although the cops got the credit. Well, Saurel and Gatti were partners. It so happened that the truce came along. Saurel and Rucker and—and the authorities smoked the peace pipe. Otherwise you'd have been bumped off by Saurel's mob soon after you potted Gatti. To-night's murder says the pipe is out."

McNamara looked at Sullivan curiously. "How much better off am I," he asked, "now that you've wised me up?"

"Lots," said Sullivan. "Forewarned is forearmed, ain't it?"

"I guess so," said McNamara. "Thanks, Jerry."

"Ah, that's all right. I'd a-felt terrible if you was bumped off without knowing what hit you."

This time McNamara managed to smile. But the next instant his face was once more intensely somber.

"Sure," he said, "I'd hate to be surprised with a bullet. I'd rather see it coming, so's I can shake hands with it before it kisses me on the brow like a sister."

If there was sarcasm in this speech, the detective did not get it.

"Of course," he said, "you'll be leaving town. That's the best thing to do. Take a six-month jaunt to Canada."

"No," said McNamara, "I'm not leaving town."

"The hell you say! Why not?"

I DON'T run away from anybody," McNamara answered, with a slight, pathetic shrug of his broad shoulders.

It was as though he could find no other words to explain what was so patently a piece of folly. It was as though he had said:

"I know I ought to run away. I know I'm a fool to stay. Let it go at that. I'm a fool."

"Then what in hell are you going to do?" Sullivan demanded.

McNamara's face was drained of blood. His eyes were wide and fixed on the detective without seeming to see him. Behind them was the full knowledge of what being on the spot meant.

"Well?" Sullivan demanded.

It was then that McNamara's answer came slowly. There was, in his low, distinct tones, the bitterness acquired from his experience as a speakeasy proprietor, who bucked the racket almost single-handed.

"I am going to the Pavilion where Saurel and his mob hang out. I'm going to-night."

Sullivan stared at him, a trifle awed by what he saw in the other's face. It was the look of a man who was seeing something strange and terrible—his own corpse perhaps, his hearse, his funeral.

"Listen, Jerry," McNamara continued, wetting his dry lips, "you're a cop and it's your business to bump off a gangster. You don't get put on the spot for it. But I'm on the spot. I'm no cop. I'm just a fool who has been bucking the racket for—for the hell of it maybe. Or maybe it's because I just happen to hate the big shots with the big gats and the yellow bellies. Anyway, I've been bucking them from the start and now I'm not leaving town. I'm crazy and I'm going to be bumped off. I might just as well take my own gun, stick the muzzle in my ear and pull the trigger."

Jerry Sullivan mopped his brow. "Ye-ah," he said with an effort. "Once they got you ticketed, you're a stiff unless you skip."

"You've got no choice except to sit around and wait for them to kill you," McNamara said.

"Ye-ah," said Sullivan, "but ain't that better than walkin' right up to 'em and asking for it, like you plan to do to-night?"

"No, it isn't better. And I'll tell you why—in words that aren't my own, words I heard a chink use not so long

ago. He said: 'Life in the shadow of death is not worth living.' My experience has taught me that I could escape death for a day, for a month, for many months. But you can never escape the fear of it, which is much worse."

"Huh," grunted Sullivan. "That's chink logic. Bad for a white man."

"I don't know about that," McNamara answered. "It happens to be exactly the way I feel about it. I can see it as plainly as though it only happened yesterday."

"See what?"

"That chink, Lee Foo. I can hear him talking between sips of tea. I remember all that he said to me. I know exactly how he felt."

"Say, have you got anything in that pipe besides tobacco?"

"A memory," McNamara retorted gently.

Sullivan snorted.

MAYBE I'll be dead before morning," McNamara said. "Let me tell you a little about that chink."

"Fire away."

"My sister is an interior decorator, you know, and some one told her about Lee Foo's curio shop. Well, sister was scared to go alone. So she asked her tough, younger brother to escort her. I did. Lee Foo entertained us like a lord and lady, served tea and rice cakes. My sister selected a few things and we left. I dropped into the shop the next day to see if the articles had been sent. Lee Foo was having his tea. So of course I had to sit down and join him.

"You seem to have forgotten who Lee Foo was, Jerry. He was an Oxford graduate and the head of the Hip Sing Tong in Chicago. You know as well as I do that he was bumped off exactly two months ago to-day!"

"I remember," Sullivan said. "These chink names all sound alike to me."

"And I was there when it happened," McNamara said.

"The hell you say!"

"Yes, I was there—in at the death you might say. It was a year after I'd first met him, and eight months after I'd last seen him. Eight months previous to that, the curio shop had closed down and Lee Foo had disappeared. Driving through the neighborhood, two months ago to-day, I noticed the shutters were up and the door open. So I walked in. There was Lee Foo, sitting by the taboret, sipping his tea. But the Lee Foo I had last seen was only thirty years old. This Lee Foo looked twice that, and his hair was gray. I can tell you, it frightened me. When I asked him what had caused such a terrible change, he told me this story, with a strange smile on his face all the while.

"'My son,' he began, and I didn't think it strange that a man scarcely older than myself should call me son, he looked so old and gray. 'My son,' he said, after pouring me some tea, 'I was young, now I am old. Yet scarcely eight months have passed since you saw me last. Once again my shop is open, and once again we are having tea together. But you are a young man still, and I, who was young then, am old."

McNamara paused. "Lee Foo knew," he muttered. "He knew what it was to be marked for death."

Sullivan lit a cigarette. "Those chinks give me the heeby-jeebies."

"'In New York, eight months ago,' Lee Foo went on, 'five minutes after eleven o'clock at night, a Hip Sing was killed by an On Leong. At midnight, we in Chicago, and our brothers in far away San Francisco, knew what had happened. Before morning twenty-one of both tongs were dead throughout the country. After a truce of a year, the tongs were again at war.

"'A panic seized me, and I ran away. I was afraid to die. I knew that if I remained I would be dead before another twenty-four hours had passed. So for eight months I have been a

wanderer, from city to city, from town to town, homeless, friendless, sometimes penniless, always hunted and afraid.

"'Toward the end of those long months, mysteriously, a larger wisdom came to me. I asked myself—what good is living like this, always hunted, always afraid, always running away? And I answered—death is better. Therefore I have come back and reopened my shop only an hour ago. Think you that the On Leongs do not know I have come back? They know—they know. And I sip my tea and wait. I am not afraid. I know that death is better than my life has been in the last eight months. I wait—I wait——'

HE was refilling my cup," McNamara went on, "when three chinks came into the place. One of them poked me with a gun and told me to get up and get out. I got out, but not before I had seen on Lee Foo's face a look of perfect peace and contentment. He lifted his hand and waved it gently, saying goodby to me. I walked out in a daze. The next second they blazed away inside. Lee Foo was dead.

"Do you see now, Jerry? I can't run away, and I can't go about in continual dread of being bumped off. Lee Foo taught me something I can never forget. I don't want my hair to turn gray with waiting and dodging. I want to sleep at nights or else sleep for good. That's about the size of it. If I'm on the spot, I want to have it over with right away. I don't want to go through what Lee Foo went through. That's why I'm going to the Pavilion to-night. I'm going toward death instead of away from it. If you think I'm a fool, you're welcome to your opinion."

"No," said Sullivan. "I guess you're just an Irishman—a chink-Irishman."

"And," said McNamara, disregarding the forced witticism, "if I croak, I croak. But," he added solemnly, "if I come through all right, I quit this racket for good. I've earned a rest."

THE Pavilion was a resort on the Lake Shore, frequented for the most part by the sporting element. It was a combined night club and gambling house and was reputed to be owned by Sam Saurel himself. McNamara entered it at midnight and took a seat at an empty table. The jazz band blared and the chorines went through the complicated steps of their dance number. McNamara looked around nervously, gazing from the dance floor to the mezzanine and back again. He saw that Saurel and two companions had entered from the rear and had taken seats at a table not ten paces away.

A strange feeling of peace took possession of him. Lee Foo was wise, but he, McNamara, was wiser. The yellow man had embraced death finally as his only friend. The white man would make a game of it before he passed out.

A waiter stood over him and he looked up.

"A planked steak, rare," he said "with plenty of mushrooms, and a pitcher of beer."

He noticed that Saurel was looking at him with poorly concealed amazement. The three were evidently talking about him.

"They won't dare pull a murder on the floor here," he thought. "And my coming here wasn't a bad move. They don't know what to make of it, and they'll have to proceed with caution. Jerry Sullivan is just a copper—no imagination. Imagination can lick a machine gun if you know how."

McNamara was not hungry. Nevertheless, when the steak was brought to him, he attacked it as though he had not eaten for a week. The beer revolted him, but he continued to fill his glass and drain it until the pitcher was empty. Now and again chewing on a mouthful of food, he would gaze placidly over to

Saurel's table and keep on chewing, slowly, cowlike in his apparent contentment. An hour later he rose from the table, danced with one of the hostesses, treated her to a caviar sandwich and a glass of bad champagne and sent her away. Later he ordered a pot of coffee and a package of cigarettes and settled himself to watch the rest of the entertainment. At three o'clock he was still there. Saurel and his two companions had not moved. McNamara called for his check and walked off the floor. At the cloakroom he retrieved his hat. A minute later he was in a cab, homeward bound, trembling in every limb, but puffing on his pipe.

He was still alive. He had faced Saurel on his own ground, and he was not dead. The idea that had come to life in his overstrained brain was working. He had taken the first trick.

For three nights in succession McNamara went to the Pavilion and for three nights he repeated the same performance. He ate a steak; he gulped down a pitcher of beer; he danced; he looked across at Saurel as he chewed; he paid and he walked out unharmed. On the fourth night it was Saurel who did not show up at the Pavilion.

TWO days later a dinner was tendered to Judge Villard, at which the upper world and the underworld were about equally represented. Among the guests was Samuel Saurel, beer baron and gambling-machine racketeer. Mr. Saurel was ill at ease. Sitting next to him, sipping his drink with an air of great boredom, was Thomas McNamara. Mr. Saurel was puzzled as to how McNamara had come to be invited and was extremely annoyed at McNamara's proximity.

"How's the champagne?" McNamara said, by way of making conversation. "As bad as the stuff you hand out to the suckers in your joint?"

"You been one of the suckers lately, I notice," Saurel answered, barely moistening his thin lips with the sparkling liquid.

"Your steaks are good," McNamara said, "only you charge too much for them. As for me being a sucker, maybe that's so. But I'm a bigger sucker for coming to this dinner. When I was a boy, judges didn't eat with gunmen."

"Who invited you?"

"Oh, I dug up an invite somewhere. Funny they should put me next to you, Saurel."

"What's funny about it?"

McNamara chuckled. "Well, don't you think it's funny?"

"Why should I?"

"Have some salt for your celery," McNamara answered irrelevantly.

McNamara left the table early, on the pretext of making a phone call. Saurel ate with a poor appetite. Saurel was puzzled. For three days now he had had two of his friends stationed at the Lakeview Apartments, around the time McNamara was known to return from his speakeasy. These unobtrusive gentlemen had reported that they had not seen McNamara either going in or coming out. This was not strange, since McNamara had formed the very healthful habit of entering by way of another building and from the roof, and of making his exit in the morning in the same way. A taxicab was always waiting for him. He entered his speakeasy in the same way. There he remained in his office and no longer stood behind the bar.

In his office mysterious phone calls came to him. A voice on the other end would say:

"Saurel is going out to the races. Smith will have the sedan at Halstead in ten minutes. Be ready."

"O. K.," McNamara would say and hang up.

An hour later McNamara would be at the races, and ten or fifteen minutes later, guided by a person who seemed

to know his way about, he would be standing at Saurel's elbow.

"How you betting, Saurel?"

Saurel would give a frightened start, turn round and go white to the lips.

"Funny how we run into each other," McNamara said with a short laugh, not giving the other a chance to reply. "Tell you what, Saurel, you ought to bet on all the sorrel-colored nags. What's in a name? And I'll bet against them. So long. See you some more, Saurel."

McNamara would stride away, knowing full well that Saurel would not dare to shoot in a place so public. Nobody would notice that two men preceded and two men followed him, nor that when Saurel left the track, himself accompanied by a bodyguard, another man would follow.

The next day Saurel went to a doctor. He complained of not being able to sleep. In the doctor's waiting room sat McNamara.

"Hello, Saurel. What brings you here?"

The gang leader swallowed hard. Tears actually welled up in his eyes. He had not slept for two nights and he was in a state of nervous exhaustion. Now, seeing McNamara again, a superstitious dread came over him for an instant and he had the mad impulse to fling himself upon the other. McNamara watched him narrowly and with a wolfish satisfaction. Saurel was in a panic.

When McNamara's turn came, he insisted that Saurel go first.

"Go ahead, Saurel. I only have enlarged tonsils, but you look badly shot. Go ahead in. I can wait."

When Saurel came out McNamara was gone.

FOR three days after Saurel had the feeling of being shadowed, but he did not once see McNamara. He slept less than ever. On the fourth day, which was Sunday, Saurel and McNamara came face to face on Michigan Boulevard near a police booth.

"You look rotten, Saurel," McNamara said. "Worried about something. Taxi!"

The cab drew up to the curb, McNamara got in, waved to the speechless Saurel and drove off.

That night as Saurel stepped out upon the pier of his Pavilion for a breath of fresh air, a motor boat backfired and Saurel fainted.

The next day, at the railroad depot, Saurel saw the face of McNamara everywhere. Even the face of the porter who carried his bags became suddenly McNamara's.

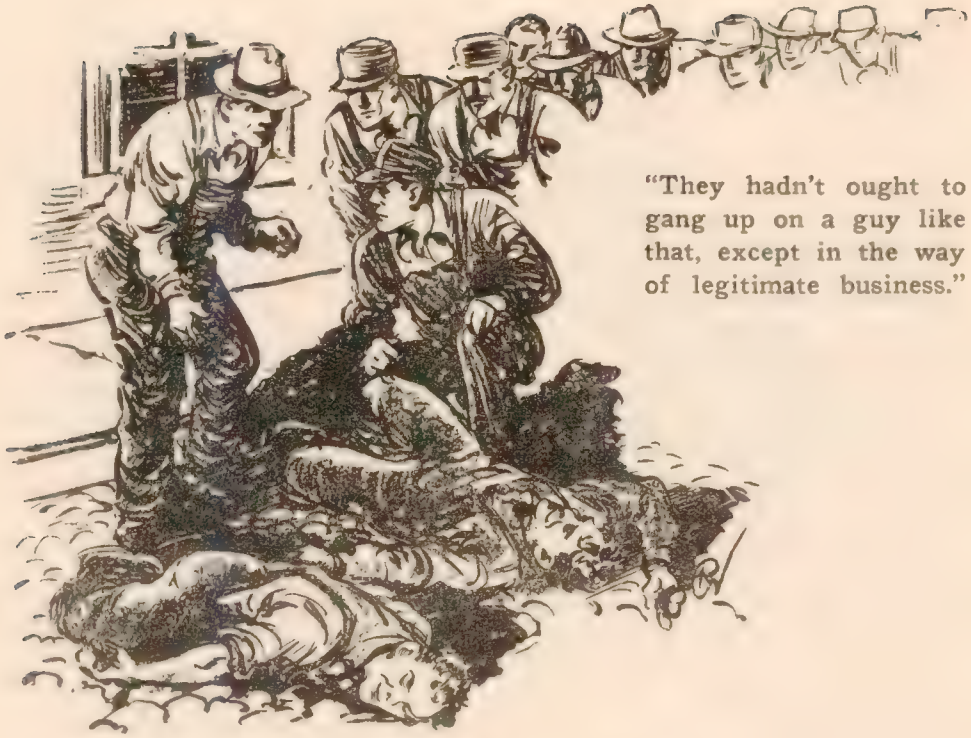
Saurel was attempting to eat lunch in the dining car of the train, speeding toward the coast, when McNamara entered.

Saurel, white as a sheet, got up. It was not possible, he told himself. Nevertheless it was McNamara who was coming toward him. Something snapped in Saurel's brain. He turned and ran stumblingly toward the platform.

The account of the eyewitnesses in the observation car was meager enough. They saw a man, apparently demented, dart among them, casting fearful looks over his shoulder meanwhile. And before they could realize what he was about, this man had thrown himself from the swiftly moving train.

McNamara had come among them a moment later, but none of them saw any connection between the entrance of this calm young man and the suicide of the other. The train, of course, was brought to a stop. The man was pronounced dead. He was identified by papers in his pocket. All the evening papers in the big cities carried accounts of the suicide that night.

McNamara had bucked the racket for the last time, not with a gat but with psychology. He took a Chinaman's chance.



"They hadn't ought to gang up on a guy like that, except in the way of legitimate business."

Stevedore

By Laurence Jordan

WHEN Vince Cornman first saw Graw Sullivan the latter was preparing to sock somebody in the jaw.

Vince, who had an eye for a fight, stopped as he lounged past the two tall men who faced each other in argument. He leaned against the warehouse wall, and unconsciously rolled up his sleeves and hitched up his old, paint-specked pants. He smiled a surprisingly sudden, warm smile as he listened, unabashed, to their conversation.

"You," said the black-browed, flat-nosed one whose shoulders were ever so slightly stooped, "had might as well collect your boys and get the hell out of this district. Go north. Go south. Get on the other river. But get the hell out, because this is a juicy section, and 'Bugle Bill' an' his boys are movin' in."

"Who," asked Graw Sullivan with a shy kindly smile, "is Bugle Bill?"

The stoop-shouldered one swung his heavy body a step nearer.

"He's the toughest, slickest stevedore boss on the water front," he snarled, "an' besides, he's me!"

Now Graw Sullivan ran his left hand through his red curly hair, and then scratched his long stubbled jaw, still smiling as shyly as ever, but Vince noted that his right fist clenched as it hung at his side.

"Well, then, Bugle Bill," said Graw,

"there's only one thing for me to do. I want you to know I got nothing against you personal. I want you to understand that I'm just protectin' my business, see?"

Bugle Bill, mouth half open in a sneer, waited for him to go on. Then, abruptly, the mouth closed, the sneer disappeared. For Graw's fist had risen from the ground in a tremendous, flaying arc, and had crashed against Bugle Bill's jaw and lifted him from his feet. Weakly he brought his arm up, but Graw's other fist had connected with his nose. He dropped his arm and stumbled peacefully to the cobbles. Still smiling shyly, Graw Sullivan swung about and walked away.

FROM the warehouse door beside Vince a low laugh sounded. Vince turned, and saw a florid bald man with a pencil behind his ear propped against the door side.

"He's a wonderful boy," said the bald man, turning toward Vince, "a pleasure to have around."

"Must be," said Vince. "Work for you?"

"Sort of. I hire him and his gang to do the loading and unloading. They're good boys."

Vince walked up to the bald man and stood beside him.

"Loadin' and unloadin'?" he asked.

"Sure."

"Then you're the man I want to see. That's my profession too. Got any jobs?"

The bald man lifted colorless eyebrows and stepped a pace backward. He looked Vince slowly up and slowly down. Then he heaved a long, tortured sigh.

"Listen," he said. "You're big and healthy, but you got a smile that children love and an innocent face. I like you. I can't help it. I'm that way. I like you fine. No, I won't give you no job."

"What's the matter?" asked Vince. "I'm good. I can work like a man an' a half. You won't be wastin' your jack."

"Don't make it hard for me," said the bald man. "I got orders to hire the first likely men every day—an' you look likely enough. But kid, I want to give you a break. I don't want to see you half murdered by Graw Sullivan and his boys."

"Who the hell is Graw Sullivan?" asked Vince, drawing himself up. The bald man opened a yellow-toothed mouth.

"You crazy?" he asked sympathetically.

"Why should I know who he is. I'm just in from Detroit."

"He," said the bald man, "is the guy that just conked yonder carrion before our very eyes."

"I see," murmured Vince. "I see." Then an amused twinkle appeared in his eyes and he smiled. "He's a stevedore boss is he? He won't let no strange stevedores work in his territory. Am I right?"

"You are right," said the bald man.

"I'm on, mister," he said. "Thanks for warnin' me, but I'm an independent stevedore by profession. It's my business to beat dock rackets. I thrive on it. Let's go."

"Suit yourself," said the bald man.

GRAW SULLIVAN'S men, who had orders—orders that were enforced strictly if good-naturedly—not to interfere unless called upon, worked away at loading boxes onto trucks. All twelve of them, however, kept one eye on the boss as he walked briskly toward Vince Cornman and stood before him staring diffidently into his humorous eye. Vince rested his wooden box against the truck and returned the gaze. The two men were the same height, approximately the same build, and not too dissimilar in features.

"Listen, boy," said Graw smoothly, "not to bring up an unpleasant subject, but your workin' here sort of slows up the work. You see, the boys are used to workin' for me. I boss the job, an' it all goes off fine. You sort of ain't used to the system. Why don't you get a job up a Hundred an' Twenty-fi't' Street or somewhere?"

"I'll take your orders," said Vince pleasantly.

"Come now," smiled Graw. "Be reasonable. That ain't the question. It ain't natural that you should work good wit' the boys. They ain't used to you, an' you ain't used to me. It just sort of wouldn't work. Get me?"

"Not quite," said Vince, shoving his wooden box to the back of the truck and picking up another. "I'm a good man."

Graw shook his head, and stood thinking for a moment.

"Well, now," he said, "I'll tell you. Unfortunately I like your face. It's kinda like my own. Go on an' work away till we've got rid o' this batch o' trucks. Then you an' me'll go an' have a beer. I think I can make you see reason. I don't hold much wit' violence."

"O. K.," nodded Vince. "I'll listen to any man's story." And he went back to work.

It was an hour before the string of trucks were loaded. The men worked fast and efficiently under Graw Sullivan's lazy direction. Graw himself did almost nothing. He wandered about shifting men from truck to truck, and sat on the warehouse step talking with the bald man. When the trucks moved off he at last said:

"Stick around, boys. There's more coming yet."

Then he took Vince's arm.

"This way," he said, and half pushed him toward a saloon on the corner whose doors still swung free to the street as in time long past.

LEANING against the dented bar, both had a beer and ordered another before speaking. Then Graw said:

"You see it's this way."

"What way?"

"This way. I control stevedorin' rights on the East River front between Delancey an' Grand. I own my own gang. They pay me a percentage. That's my business. You see where I'd be if I let floaters like you in on it."

"You'd have to work for a livin'," smiled Vince.

Graw smiled back, shy and shamefaced.

"That's just it," he said. "An' I don't like to work for a livin'. I wouldn't do it. No, sir. Not if you paid me."

"Then where do I come in?" asked Vince.

"That's the tragedy of it," Graw murmured. "You don't."

"Well," said Vince, "now I know about you I'll tell you about me. I'm what I call an independent stevedore. I like to travel, I do. I go from water front to water front an' get me a dollar or two ahead. Sometimes I stay a month. I may stay here in the big town for two months. Anyway, I don't pay nobody. Not any. It would irritate me. It would make me nervous. I'm delicate that way. Now you let me alone and I'll leave you alone. O. K.?"

"Sorry," said Graw, "but it ain't. Have another beer."

"Thanks."

"I can see," Graw went on, "that this is a fight of wills. I don't want it to go no further than that neither. Tell you what I'll do, just because I like you. First time in my career. I'll take you in for a ten per cent cut."

"Thanks," said Vince. "But I couldn't. I couldn't tie myself down. It would make me nervous."

"You can see," Graw said, "that I may have to take drastic measures. If

I let you get away with this I could never handle another gang. If I do anything to annoy you you'll understand I'm fightin' for my life. I don't want you to get sore at me none."

"Me?" asked Vince. "Never. Go back to work?"

"I suppose so," sighed Graw. "But I wish you'd go halfway with me on this business."

"Me," said Vince, "I never compromise. Let's go."

In silence they walked slowly back to Whitman's warehouse. Another fleet of trucks had already drawn up before it and Graw's men were busy loading the heavy wooden boxes into them. Vince turned his back to Graw and went over behind a truck. Quietly he joined in the work, swinging the boxes into the truck and whistling to himself.

But as Graw, after watching him for a moment, went to join him, the others stopped their work and gathered round on tiptoe. Vince continued to swing boxes without looking around. Graw tapped his back. Vince straightened up.

"I WANT you to know," said Graw, "I ain't got nothin' against you personal——"

Vince stared at him with a knowing eye. Graw ran his left hand through his red curly hair, then scratched his long, stubbled jaw, smiling shyly. But Vince could see, since he was watching for it, that his right fist clenched as it hung at his side.

"I want you to understand," Graw went on, "that I'm just protectin' my business——"

Vince swung, and hit him in the jaw scarcely in time. Graw staggered and his own haymaker glanced off Vince's neck. Vince followed immediately with his left.

The stevedores grouped round, stared, but did not move. Always they had been ordered not to interfere, and now they could hardly realize what was happening. Vince did not give them a glance, for he was busy pressing his advantage, pummeling Graw with both fists while he still had the advantage.

Graw did not land so much as a blow. He had been caught so completely off his guard and off his balance that his fists could do little but flail and miss. In a very little while he sank to the street. Even in his nearly unconscious state his face held that look of shy friendliness.

Vince jumped back to prepare for new opponents; by now Graw's men had awakened. Two caught him from behind and the rest swarmed upon him from the front. It was hardly a struggle. Numberless fists connected with Vince's jaw and body. They did not hurt. There were so many and they came so swiftly that Vince had the sensation of taking an anæsthetic. The pain grew fainter and fainter until it had become almost pleasant. When the twelve stevedores abandoned him, a very unconscious heap upon the cobbles, his face also, bore a kindly, friendly expression. For a moment he and Graw lay side by side, looking like two sweetly sleeping angels.

Then the twelve stevedores carried Graw into the warehouse and resumed their work. The bald man standing in the doorway shook his head and clucked his tongue. The water front, he allowed, was no place for babes and sucklings.

VINCE awakened from his enforced slumber sneezing. The wind had risen, and small particles of sawdust, dried garbage and other foreign matter blew up his nostrils. South Street was thick and foggy with whirling specks of refuse.

Vince was bruised and sore. He pushed himself to his feet and looked about. Trucks and men were gone. The door to Whitman's warehouse was shut and padlocked. Painfully Vince walked four blocks uptown and pushed

open the door of the dirty brick rooming house where, that morning, he had taken a cubby-hole room. The bos'n's widow who ran the place stood in the hallway, hands on hips, and regarded him trucently.

"You look beat up," she said.

"I am beat up."

Hand on bannister he dragged himself upstairs. In the cubby-hole room he lay on the narrow bed and undressed slowly, kicking off his shoes and smoking a cigarette between the removal of shirt and trousers. Then he fell asleep.

He did not awaken till twilight. Wrapping himself in a towel he crept down the hall to the bathroom, bathed in tepid water, shaved himself, and returned. Out of a long bundle he took a clean shirt, a threadbare coat and a pair of blue-denim pants, and dressed. Then he went downstairs again. A little of the soreness was gone from him.

The bos'n's widow was still in the hall, and it did not seem that she had changed her position in the slightest.

"You still look beat up," she snorted.

"I still am," said Vince, smiling, "but not so bad."

"You'll come in worse," said the bos'n's widow.

Vince lounged down South Street, finding a little difficulty in maintaining his usual gracefully lazy swing, toward the saloon where he and Graw had drunk beer together. A strange blue light was coming down over the water front. Brooklyn, across the river, was incredibly blue. Even the cobbles of South Street seemed faintly coated with blue light.

The yellow lights in the saloon were very garish and dirty. A few dirtier men were lined up at the bar. The night bartender had brown streaks of tobacco juice at the wrinkled corners of his mouth. Vince sat at a small table in the corner and ordered a whisky. Presently he collected himself many slices of bread from the free-lunch counter. Upon these he laid liverwurst, cheese, mustard and pickle. He chewed and washed his food down with the whisky.

As he looked about the stuffy room he noticed that the black-browed, flat-nosed, stoop-shouldered man who, that morning, had introduced himself to Graw Sullivan as Bugle Bill, was sitting at a large table in the middle of the room, surrounded by as tough and unpleasant a group of men as Vince had ever seen.

SCARS, broken noses, thick ears, and red, battered eyes were distributed freely among them. The table was large and six of them sat about it. All leaned forward on their elbows and talked at each other in thick, guttural undertones. Vince found the sight of them something more than unpleasant, but he could not draw his eyes from them. Bugle Bill, particularly, fascinated his unwilling eye. He was shaking his finger at the men, telling them something with force, and as far as Vince could gather, without tact.

And then they fell silent, for Bugle Bill tapped his fingers on the table and turned in his chair. Graw Sullivan had entered the saloon and was standing at the bar.

Graw drank two beers, then turned his face to the room. He did not look at Bugle Bill and his boys, but saluted Vince with his hand and shouted across the room:

"I feel pretty lousy. How do you feel?"

Though he shouted, his voice was still solicitous, questioning, shy. Vince half laughed, and answered:

"Not so good. Sort of sore."

"Me too. You did a good job. Sorry the boys had to gang up on you. It ain't very fair, but it's the racket. You understand?"

"Sure."

"Well," said Graw, with another salute, "see you later," and he walked over to Bugle Bill's table and sat down in an empty chair.

"Anything you want to add to what we said this morning?" he asked without lowering his voice.

"Plenty." Bugle Bill's voice swelled to an angry bellow. His flat face was growing purple and his jaws worked automatically as if his anger were a tangible bitter thing which had to be chewed and swallowed. "Plenty."

"Better add it," said Graw. "Better have it out in the open. I hate to waste my time worryin' what people was goin' to say an' didn't get said."

"You," said Bugle Bill, "are gonna get took. You are gonna wake up with a harp in y'r hand. You're out o' luck. I got you down on Bugle Bill's list."

"I'd like to see that list," said Graw, his voice full of genuine interest.

"You ain't never gonna see no list," growled Bugle Bill, "but when me an' my boys are workin' your pretty territory you're gonna be awful sorry about some things if you can be sorry about anythin'."

"I been sorry about at lot o' things in my life," Graw admitted.

"Glad you got practice," growled Bugle Bill.

Graw tipped his chair back and called to the bartender for another beer. Bugle Bill and his boys bore down on him with stares from angry and contemptuous eyes. Graw drank his beer slowly and lit a cigar. Then he stood up.

"Well," he asked, "have we finished talkin'?"

"We have finished talkin'," said Bugle Bill.

Graw paid up at the bar and walked out of the saloon. Immediately Bugle Bill and his boys got up. They too paid, and filed quietly onto the street.

Then, when they had gone, Vince, hands in pockets, followed them. He was half smiling, and his step was easy, as if he had forgotten his aches and bruises.

"There's somethin' about this I don't like," he said to himself. "They hadn't ought to gang up on a guy like that except in the way of legitimate business."

GRAW SULLIVAN walked up Delancey Street, neglecting to keep a wary eye cocked. Not that he did not expect attack, but he did not see what he could do about it. Furthermore, he was in the habit of waiting for a situation to develop a little before he decided upon a definite course of action. For instance, he was thinking, if he should go home and lie in hiding until he could collect his own gang about him, he might be invaded. He might even be met at the door. On the other hand, if attacked in the street he might find it easy to make his escape, or even, with luck, to come out the winner.

Unfortunately at the moment he was thinking these thoughts, seven men were collecting in an alley waiting for him to pass, and as soon as he had decided that he was safe for another ten minutes, these seven leaped at him and bore him to the ground.

This was the second unexpected attack that Graw had experienced in a day, and this time he was not completely off his guard. His mind worked fast and well, and as he fell his powerful fist smashed into the jaw of one of the enemy yeggmen. That yegg fell to the ground stiff and straight and did not get up.

Once on his back, Graw got his knees and feet to work. In a moment he heard the comforting sounds which told him that his left foot had found the groin at which it was aimed. The right foot in another's stomach disposed of him for a moment, but soon he was back full of negative emotions of hate and revenge.

Things were fast getting out of

Graw's grasp. Bugle Bill, for one, was twisting his left arm like a corkscrew and some one with sharp teeth was biting the left ear from his head. Another was sitting on his stomach doing obscure things to his feet. The object, apparently, was torture.

Graw wriggled and kicked, and in a moment his own teeth found something to bite. His breath was coming short, and a blow in the solar plexus made him dizzy.

Then, miraculously, the weight was removed from his stomach, and the man who was biting him was wrenched away, carrying with him only a small and unimportant piece of ear. Graw rolled over, getting the arm from Bugle Bill and leaped to his feet, arms flailing wildly in the air.

And incredibly, the number of his attackers had dwindled to four. And even more incredibly another man, of about his height and build, was fighting beside him. The new man was engaged in knocking the heads of two of his enemies together. Graw brought a joyous and rejuvenated fist against a gaping mouth near by and leaped upon Bugle Bill. The two stumbled, fell to the ground and rolled over and over.

THEN somehow, his knee was pressing down on Bugle Bill's chest, one hand held his wrists together, and another was pushing the flat nose.

"Say 'uncle,' " said Graw.

"I won't."

The pressure increased. Bugle Bill began to gasp.

"When you say 'uncle,' " said Graw, "it means you're licked. It means you ain't never goin' to bother me an' my boys again. Now say 'uncle.' "

"No."

Again the pressure increased. Bugle Bill began to writhe and groan.

"Say 'uncle.' "

"If I say it will y' stop?"

"Yeah." But still the pressure increased.

"Uncle," screamed Bugle Bill.

Graw got off him and stood up. Bugle Bill pushed himself to his feet, cringing; then, suddenly, with all his weight and force he jumped at Graw.

But halfway in his leap, he met a fist which knocked the wind from his lungs, and another which crashed against his temple.

Docilely he crumpled to the ground.

Graw swung to face new enemies, but there were none. Only the gay smile of Vince Cornman met his shy one.

"I guess they learned their lesson," said Vince.

"For one day," said Graw Sullivan, "you and me has done a lot of fightin'."

The twelve men who were loading wooden boxes onto the *Blue Queen,* Channing and Biddle's new 10,000 tonner, stopped work and gathered into an angry huddle as Vince Cornman rolled up his sleeves and began piling boxes in the heavy net under the derrick.

"Don't some guys never learn?" asked one, incredulously.

"Sooner or later," said another, and the twelve began to advance on him with a slow but purposeful step.

They halted, however, when Graw Sullivan jumped from behind a truck with clenched fists.

"Get back to your work, you guys," he shouted. "No rough stuff."

"Hey," asked one, backing away from the boss's squared shoulders, "what the hell is that guy, anyway?"

"Around here," said Graw, "he's what we know as an independent stevedore."

And Vince Cornman went on working, whistling and smiling gayly.

Your Handwriting Tells

Conducted By Shirley Spencer

If you are just starting out to find your first job; or if you are dissatisfied with your present occupation and are thinking of making a change; or if the character of your friends—as revealed in their handwriting—interests you; or if, as an employer, you realize the advantage of placing your employees, in factory or office, in positions for which they are best suited—send a specimen of the handwriting of the person concerned to Handwriting Expert, COMPLETE STORIES, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., and inclose a stamped, addressed envelope. All samples submitted will be analyzed by Shirley Spencer, and her expert opinion will be given, free of charge.

The coupon, which you will find at the end of this department, must accompany each handwriting specimen which you wish to have read. If possible, write with black ink.

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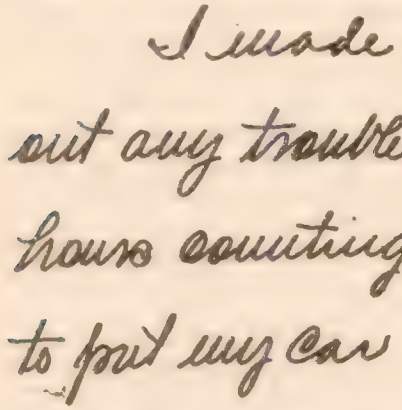
S. V. D., Pennsylvania:—Very heavy pen pressure indicates materialism.



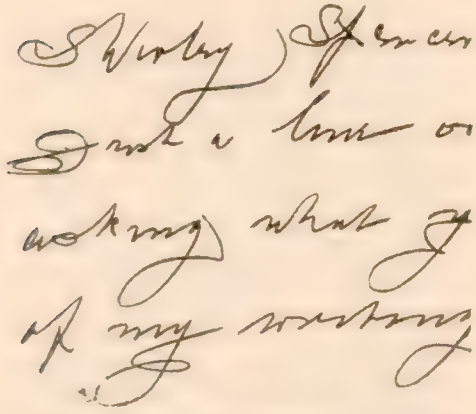
Those people who are generous with the ink are the ones who love the material things of the world—the comforts and pleasures—and are usually interested in making money, though there is an artistic type that is creative.

Your handwriting is quite typical of the materialistic person who is generous and good-natured. The rounded letter formations, the wide spacing, and the large writing all indicate you have a warm heart, are very sincere and frank, and that you wish others to enjoy the good things of life, too.

There is vitality and endurance portrayed in the thick strokes and the even pen pressure. You are independent and are able to stand on your own two feet, squarely and firmly. Indolence may be counted against you, perhaps, for you

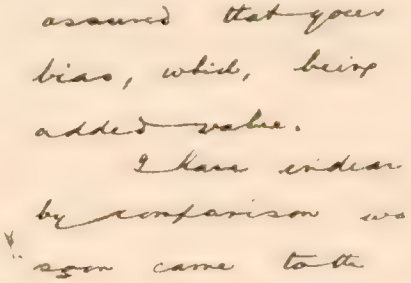
do like to be comfortable and hate to be hurried.

W. T., California:—In contrast to the deliberate gentleman from Pennsylvania, is this native son of California! See the speed with which the pen and mind have worked. The writing is angular instead of rounded, indicating a very keen and quick mind. Here is nervous energy, and a great deal of it is scattered needlessly. Better try to conserve some of it, young man.



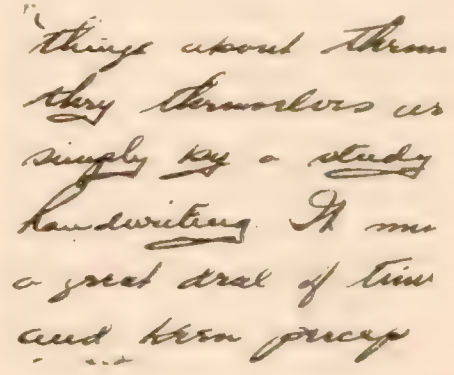
Those letters which are tied up tight like a sailor's knot are the signs of a very secretive nature. This sign contradicts those open "o's" and "a's" which mean an open and trusting nature. Those peculiar loops in the "y" loops bear out this inconsistency and indication of eccentricity. I know that you are rather odd and erratic, proud and egocentric, but impractical and easily influenced. The light, even pen pressure shows that you have fine feelings. You certainly have a clever mind, but you need to straighten out the kinks in your thinking that are tripping you up.

L. B., Canada:—Yours is a scholarly script and shows that you have had a background of culture and advantages of training and study. Small, fine writing with artistic capitals and well-formed letters is always the indication of literary tastes and ability, as well as artistic appreciation. The size is the mark of concentration, and powers of concentration come from study and application of the mind.



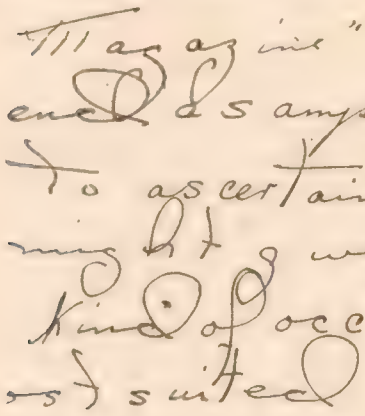
The Greek "d" is to be found in your writing, which is another sign of culture and fine taste. Then the loop of your "y" swings to the right instead of to the left, which indicates an altruistic and kind person. The joining of words by the terminal of the preceding word shows continuity of thought and logic. The conclusion is, then, that you are a man of fine tastes, culture and refinement, with a well-trained and interesting mind, who is kind, considerate, gentle and affectionate.

A. B., Chicago:—In your script we see the combination of heavy pressure and nervous energy, and the result should be something creative. Advertising writing is surely right in your field, for you have ideas and you know how to express them forcibly.



The rhythm in your writing and the tall capitals indicate poise, dignity and ease of expression. You have a strong dramatic instinct—an asset in your line of work. There is vitality, force, will power and originality all indicated. You have a magnetic personality, are tenacious—see the tiny hooks on the t-bars and terminals—and you are aggressive.

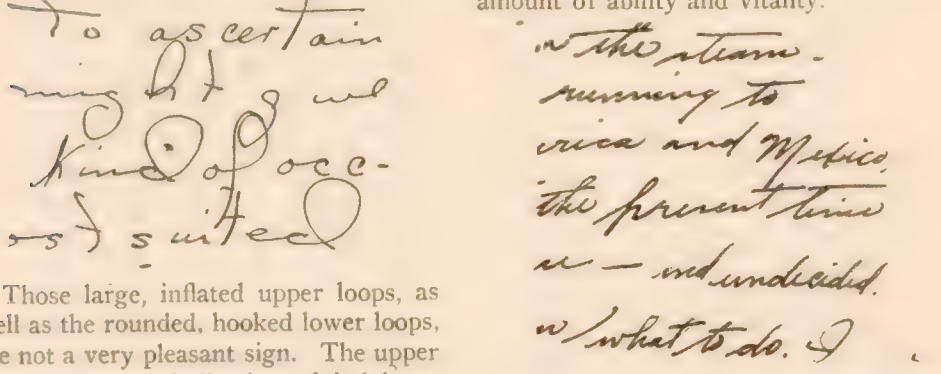
F. G., Virginia:—I'm afraid that I shall have to scold you a little. It is done in an impersonal manner.



Those large, inflated upper loops, as well as the rounded, hooked lower loops, are not a very pleasant sign. The upper ones are a sure indication of indolence and, when taken into consideration with the letters that lean to the left, they emphasize a self-centered and selfish nature. You lack poise and balance and are blind to your faults. Sometimes that t-bar does not cross the stem of the "t," which means procrastination and introspection. It is especially an indication of your lazy tendencies, because there are evidences of a strong will which can be used when necessary.

Yes, you have artistic talent and should develop it fully. You are intuitive and original. However, before all that talent can be developed to its highest, you need to develop your character. You can do it, if you once make up your mind, and will swallow your pride and vanity long enough.

S. D., New York City:—You have a very mature script for a boy of sixteen, and it is encouraging to see that you are ambitious. You will be able to go far with that strong, driving will which those long t-bars show you have. The fault is that you are too restless, but I am sure you are going to master that soon. You are still young and it is natural for you to feel that way. Don't let dissatisfaction pull you down, however. Your writing runs downhill somewhat, showing that you are depressed. Just remember that you have your whole life before you and that you have more than the ordinary amount of ability and vitality.



I suggest that you study some more—more of a general education for a while—and then branch into the electrical field later. I think you will find chemistry interesting.

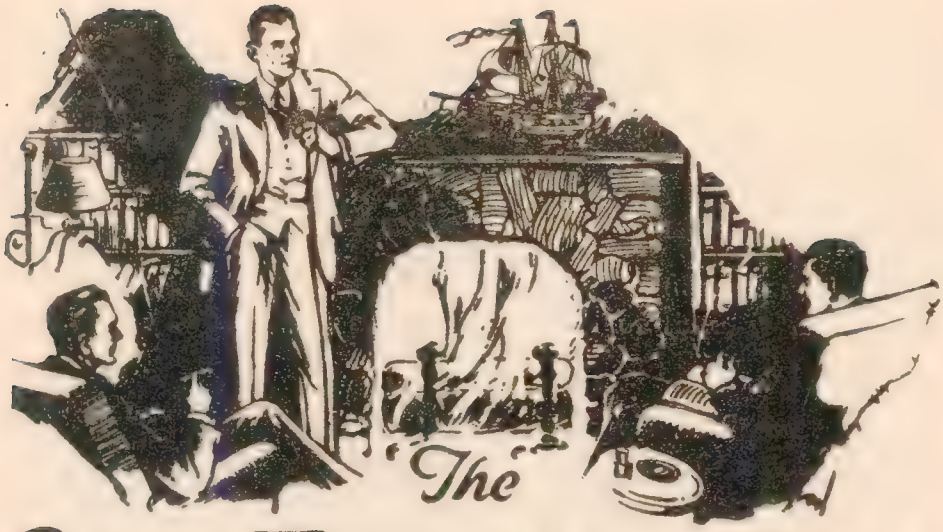
Remember the stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Handwriting Coupon for COMPLETE STORIES

This coupon must accompany each specimen of handwriting which you wish read.

Name .....

Address .....



The Get-Together Club

THE regular readers of COMPLETE STORIES need not be reminded that the Get-Together Club is nothing more than a friendly chat by the editor with the friends of the magazine—a just-among-ourselves informal discussion of the interests and problems of reader and editor. Digs and "don'ts" and compliments are all in order, if they are of general interest. Every reader of COMPLETE is as much entitled to this space, for the expression of his opinion, as the editor. There are no strings attached to this cordial invitation.

OBVIOUSLY, the editor may not be in a position to adopt your suggestions immediately, and sometimes the editor's better judgment may see in these same suggestions the personal and private tastes of an individual rather than the common preferences and concerns of the average reader. But an editor is always interested in the opinions of every reader, and every reader likes to hear what the other fellow thinks about a story.

THIS is the place, too, to reply to the many requests that come to me by would-be writers to read their manuscripts and to give them some detailed criticism of their stories. Here is a typical example of this kind.

Martins Ferry, Ohio,
Otcober 25, 1930.

DEAR EDITOR: I am sending you my story and hope you will buy it for COMPLETE. I read your magazine regular, and I have wrote it for your COMPLETE because I know it is as good as some stories you publish. I have wrote poetry before, and now I have wrote this story because I got all the facts from the early life of my husband in the West. Send me a check for my story or tell me why you won't publish it. I'm not yet a regular author, but I aim to be one, and you ought to be able to tell me why you won't publish this one if you send it back.

Why do editors always send my writings back to me with only a printed slip? Ain't new authors entitled to some consideration, and how do you break into this writing game? I want a quick reply, because I know another place where I can send my story and where I know they will read it and buy it. Yours truly,

MRS. MARTHA EVANS.

IN the course of a month several dozens of such letters find their way to my desk, and it is impossible for a busy editor to reply to each one personally. These good people are laboring under a common delusion—that any one can write a story who has had an interesting experience or who has heard the life history of a pioneer. It is commonly supposed that there is nothing so easy in the world as to write and "there is big money in it." It never occurs to these aspirants to authorship that writing is a highly specialized profession and requires not only a special technical training, but certain natural gifts which the gods give to some people and deny to others.

IF the plumbing in your house gets out of order or you want to install electricity, you do not call in the first man you meet on the street who is looking for a job, but you consult a union plumber or a qualified electrician. Even then, if you want to get the best results, you will shop about among plumbers and electricians to find a good man.

THE same is true of writing. Not only a general education is necessary, but a long and difficult training in the art of writing. No editor and no author can turn a would-be writer into a successful author.

If you have no pronounced talent for writing, no one can give it to you. You have to find or create that talent within yourself, and no external agency outside yourself can create it for you. A good teacher in a short-story course at one of our many colleges can analyze for you a famous short story by a celebrated writer and point out for your guidance certain technical tricks by which he has secured his effects, but he cannot point out to you, nor can he pound into you, that peculiar something which makes a good story. Moreover, very few great writers could themselves point out the so-called technical tricks by which they achieve their effects. They are not conscious of employing any tricks or literary devices to make their story register. They are born writers and instinctively employ certain literary methods to achieve their results.

ONE may know all the rules of the game of tennis and still remain a dub. And one may have conned by heart and put down in a book all the rules for successful writing and still be unable to write a readable story. Association with a physician will not cure a sick man, and no number of classes in a short-story course will make a writer out of any man or woman who has not some born instinct for writing fiction.

AND here are two more sad illusions about authorship which must be disposed of here. Writing is an easy game and there is big money in it. Given the most pronounced natural talents for writing, authorship is one of the most wearing and arduous professions in the world. When a writer says to me, "I don't know if you will get a kick out of reading this story, but I sure did get a kick out of writing it—it was such fun," I know he is either an ass or a liar, and in most cases both. Joseph Conrad, who wrote one or two of the finest short stories in the English language, said he worked harder than any galley slave or ditch digger. As for the big money—well, Conrad was always in debt and always in need of money. Certain very successful and popular writers have made vast sums of money, but thousands of professional writers just manage to make a living.

A PERSON who is not prepared to write many stories before a single story of his is recognized by an editor had better forgo his literary ambitions. The world is overcrowded with bum writers and would-be authors.

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79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

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Every story in every issue is complete. A full-length novel and eight to ten short stories of the wide open spaces.

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FAR WEST STORIES - - - Monthly, 20 cents the copy - - - Subscription Price, $2.00
The fiction in this magazine is written by authors who have established enviable reputations as writers of clean, vivid, Western stories.

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Stories that hit only the high spots. Adventure of the swiftest kind—air, sea, West, mystery, wherever men do and dare.

LOVE STORY MAGAZINE - - Weekly, 15 cents the copy - - Subscription Price, $6.00
Clean sentiment, enthralling mystery, dramatic and thrilling adventure, make it a magazine which appeals to every one who enjoys a real good love story.

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Clean, wholesome fiction, vigorously written by America's best writers of adventure, business, and the great outdoors.

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A magazine of intense interest to every female reader—really a mirror in which people's lives are reflected. Actual experiences.

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Published in the interest of all that is keen, exciting, and wholesome in sport. It represents youth and stands for all those things that youth is interested in.

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Read this magazine and become acquainted with the West as it really is, with its men, mountains, prairies, and herds of cattle.

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Contains complete, rapid-action stories of the West in its wildest aspect. Galloping hoofbeats and roar of six-guns fill every page with fire and action.

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Grocer's "Slip of the Tongue" Reveals Secret

That Gets Friend $3500 CASH in Six Months

A success story more romantic than fiction because it is true. Now the secret is told here so that readers may use it to help end *their* money worries too. And a million dollar company offers to pay a cash penalty to any man or woman who does not make $15 the first day they try this plan.

As related by

HOWARD L. ADAMS

"MY NAME is Adams—Howard L. Adams. Like thousands of other men I've been ambitious—wanted to make money. But 'luck' has been against me. At least I blamed 'bad luck' for my failures. Then suddenly—a few months ago—a peculiar thing happened that changed the whole course of my life.

"My corner grocer made a 'slip of the tongue.' He let slip a secret that I recognized at once as being priceless. I jumped at his suggestion.

"Ten weeks later I had made over $1,123.00—CASH! Now, six months since I talked to my grocer I have made $3,520.18. Figure it out for yourself: that's way over $500 a month every month for six months. At that same rate I would make over $7,000 a year. Not bad for a 'failure'!

"But that isn't all. I have also received bonuses for my work—free gifts that didn't cost me an extra cent. I've received two Chrysler automobiles, two kitchen cabinets, a sweater, a fine blanket, a beautiful fountain pen, a set of glassware, hosiery, neckties, a peach of a watch and three sets of dishes.

"You might think that I'd be excused if I were a little proud. But I'm not proud. In fact, I haven't done anything that anyone else can't do. The secret I learned and the fact that I was willing to carry out a few simple instructions should get the credit. But this I do say: Any man who will follow this plan, use this secret, and carry out the simple instructions—and any woman too,—can make good money. No reason why they shouldn't make as much as I have made. Here's the secret. I had been struggling all my life with blind alley jobs at small pay. I had tried everything. I was complaining to my grocer about my luck. Right out of a clear sky he said, 'Listen, Howard—if you want to make real money get into supplying something that everyone has got to have.' It came like a jolt. I had been struggling with poverty while my grocer had been getting rich because he was supplying something that he didn't have to sell. Instead people had to have his goods—they came to him for them—they brought their money to his pocket.

"That was it. I would handle something people had to buy. But what? What was more natural than to think of food, household necessities, things people have to USE UP—and things that they have to buy again and again, day after day.

"Just by chance I heard of that 'Miracle Man of Cincinnati'—Curtis W. Van De Mark. The stories told about him were so crazy as to be almost unbelievable. For example, people told me that he manufactured a complete line of over three hundred everyday household necessities—just what I had been looking for. But they said he would send me $18.00 worth of his products (at retail) without any risk on my part. He would do this so I could try his plan of selling. By his plan all I had to do was give away ten bottles of perfume—say what he called 'Twenty Magic Words' to ten housewives in my neighborhood—follow his simple instructions.

"Then—and this is the part I couldn't believe,—IF I DIDN'T MAKE $15 PROFIT THE VERY FIRST DAY, he would send me a company check and pay me cash for my time. And I could return the outfit and owe nothing. Think of it: A man willing to pay me cash if I didn't sell a single thing—if I didn't take a single order. And on top of that he was willing to give me a Chrysler car as an extra bonus if I sold my quota.

"Well, there must be a catch in it. I was sure of that. But I couldn't lose anything by trying, so I wrote for his outfit. It came. I went out and used it according to his instructions. And you already know the result. I can honestly advise any man or woman who wants to make money to try 'Van's' plan. You can't lose and I've proved to my own satisfaction that even a 'Failure' can make a wonderful, big income."

The same offer that Mr. Van De Mark made to Mr. Adams is now open to you. Don't send any money at all. Just send your name and address. "Van" will send you a letter and a booklet explaining all about his plan. It doesn't cost you a cent. Then if you want to test his "Twenty Magic Words," here is what he'll do for you: He'll send you his big outfit worth $18.00 at retail. He'll send you ten bottles of perfume. This is in addition to the 30 full size packages of his products that come in the outfit. He'll send you his "Twenty Magic Words" and his secret instructions for their use. He'll send you a written agreement, legal and binding upon him, and if you don't make $15.00 the very first day in what you'll say is the easiest way you ever heard of, just send back the case of products and "Van" will mail you a company check to reimburse you for the time it took to give away the perfume.

If you are really looking for a chance to make real money—get steady, permanent work—remember the grocer's slip of the tongue and start now to cash in by selling something that everyone MUST HAVE. You can't lose, and six months from now there is no reason that we can think of that you can't have $3,500 profits—just as Adams did. Remember, you send no money. And "Van" does not ship you a C. O. D. package of any kind when you send your name. Just send the blank below and you'll get "Van's" cash penalty offer by return mail. Address your envelope to Curtis W. Van De Mark, President, Dept. 1094-ZZ, Ninth & Sycamore Streets, Cincinnati, Ohio.

CURTIS W. VAN DE MARK, President,
Dept. 1094-ZZ, Ninth & Sycamore Streets,
Cincinnati, Ohio.

I hereby apply for opening in my town to start on your new cash penalty plan. Send me your cash penalty agreement, your guarantee bond and offer of $18.00 worth of your products (retail value) without risk to me. Tell me your "Twenty Magic Words" and explain you plan so I can decide if I want to try at your risk. This is not an order a you are not to ship anything C. O.

I want $ ..... per hour and

willing to give you .....

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